



Mediation Musings: Monsters Are People, Too

Sara Barnes

She might have been talking even before I had picked up the phone. My usual greeting, “Martha’s Vineyard Mediation, this is Sara speaking,” had been cut off mid-syllable and the first thing I could hear was “She is a monster. A monster. What can mediation do about a monster?” Catching up, I learned that this was possibly a housing dispute. She continued to talk a mile a minute, her angry voice concluding with, “What can you do for me?!”

I took advantage of the pause. “So you are the landlord, and—”

She cut me off. “Of course I’m the landlord, don’t you get it? She’s the monster. I’ve done everything right! She’s the one who caused this, all of this. She’s in the wrong! You need to make her pay!”

After a long and challenging intake, we set her up with a mediation team explaining that we don’t take sides, and that she and the tenant would be helped to talk and develop their own agreement. “Well if that’s the way you do it, okay,” she said “The mediator will see that she is in the wrong.” We explained that the mediator stays neutral. “Okay, I give up, let’s do it!” was her last comment.

Fast forward: they did meet, and came up with an agreement, the best they could do under the very charged circumstances. The mediators worked hard. It was not easy, but our mediators do work that is not easy every day. Now in looking back on this case, what I want to consider is what mediators can do when we hear about “monsters.”

The other person in this conflict was a human being. I am going to assume that she had people in her life that loved her, skills and gifts that made contributions to the world, as well as hopes and dreams for her life. She was not a monster. So how was it that she came to be called by that epithet?

Values, Needs, Identity

When mediators begin a mediation, they keep track of statements that indicate how the participants see themselves. We call this the *Identity Lens*. In talking with the initiator of this mediation, we learned that she identified herself as “a very experienced property owner,” saying, “This is not my first rodeo.” She felt very upset, lamenting that for the “first time in thirty years of dealing with tenants, I’m in court!”

Her statements gave some insight into her self-identification as a *good landlord*. When the court notice came about an unresolved conflict with her tenant, the event pricked at a strongly held identity marker. She mentioned this identity many times during the intake and again during the mediation.

Mediators also listen carefully to note words that describe the participants' life principles. We call this the *Values Lens*. "Who causes all that damage and doesn't offer something to help me recoup the expense? It's my property, and they destroyed it." Here the mediators noted that this client held values around property, financial restitution, and responsibility. "She is trying to get as much money out of me as she can, when she is the one who owes me for everything she has done. She's a liar." The values were becoming clearer the more she spoke, and included honesty. Clearly this situation had challenged some strongly held values.

The third area for focus when mediators are information gathering is the *Needs Lens*. "I need her out of my life! Far away! And I need this court case to go away! I'm looking for peace of mind and some fairness." The client had a pretty explicit list of self-identified needs. "I've got plenty of money, it's not the money that is my biggest problem. It's the principle of the thing. I'm going to teach this monster a lesson—she needs someone to teach her a lesson."

"It's the principle!" might be something else

When we hear about an expressed need to "teach them a lesson" or that "it's the principle, not the money," mediators have to listen carefully. The common calculation is that the speaker is masking something quite different than a high-minded principle. Instead, they may be seeking retribution or revenge. Though couched in educational terms, the true goal is often more related to getting back at someone who has pricked one's values. There is not actual concern about the learning needs of the other person. Conversely, sometimes the person is having difficulty facing their own priority of restitution and/or winning.

The mediators hear these statements and know to take time to find out what is really at the core. Once an interest becomes unwrapped as a topic—such as money, time, apology, understanding, a plan for the future, the return of the borrowed lawn mower—the process can become more productive. Mediators help to define topics with the participants and create a prioritized agenda. Mediation is not usually a place to teach lessons or change others' world views, though transformation can be a side outcome.

Mediating with Monsters

A productive process can happen only if it is a conversation between those who acknowledge, at least minimally, each other's humanity. If one party has dehumanized the other, such as categorizing them as unworthy of an equal human status, labeling them an animal, or thinking of them as a nonliving object or a *monster*, mediation is going to be hard if not impossible. The mediator can stay optimistic, though, knowing that the mediation process may be able to create a productive atmosphere. In time and with a well-facilitated conversation, the preliminary dehumanizing may be peeled away.

Mediators may use one of the following techniques to help de-monster-ize:

- Using even-handed and equalizing statements showing equality: *Mary is concerned about X and Jill is concerned about Y.*
- Amplifying details that paint the person as a whole human: *Repeating here that Jill has told us that she has been worried about this for many months and has found herself thinking a lot about how to work this out.*
- Finding connections between both participants: *You both love gardening and value the work you both put into growing beautiful flowers. Or, You both were frustrated.*
- Highlighting values of both participants: *It seems clear that both of you hold yourself to strong values, and you come across to me, your mediator, as highly principled people.*
- In a private session, addressing the dehumanizing comments directly: *You called Mary a monster during intake. Is what you said now during the joint session an indication that you think less harshly about her now?*
- Narrating the evolution of understanding: *When you came in you were both obviously angry at each other. I note that the atmosphere has cooled quite a bit and you both seem more comfortable sharing your thoughts and ideas now. Am I right?*
- Modeling kindness, respect, and positive acknowledgement to both participants. *Really helpful comment, thanks. Or, Very clear and productive. Or, Thanks for that illuminating information.*
- Commenting that the discourse is improving and a partnership is developing. *You two were having a very productive exchange there, that seemed helpful and valuable to me as your mediator. Was it for you?*

Sometimes despite the best efforts of the mediators to create an equitable and uplifting conflict resolution process, one party continues to treat the other with disdain and disrespect. The mediator can decide to end the mediation, recognizing that the process is likely to have harmful effects. I have noted that this outcome is exceedingly rare.

What is much more common is that once two people in conflict begin to talk, listen, reflect, and consider solutions; the two-dimensional dehumanizing categorization dims while the “monster’s” full humanity begins take shape within a three-dimensional form. Mediators know that how things start can be quite different compared to how things finish. They know that if they get the process and atmosphere right, monsters will disappear and two disputants with a newly stitched understanding can emerge by the end of the mediation session.

Lots of links here: Serious stuff

Essay on [dehumanization](#)

Objectification and [dehumanizing](#)

Dehumanization of the [incarcerated](#)

Anger, disgust and fear = [dehumanization](#)

Othering and Belonging Institute <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/>

Bridging or Breaking [video](#)

Fun stuff

Conflict [monsters](#)

Play the monster [game](#)

Robin Williams Conflict and the two headed [monster](#)

Are you a conflict resolution [monster?](#)