



Mediation Musings: Politics and Conflict Resolution

Sara Barnes

There outside the Edgartown courthouse the air was arctic cold, and the wind was whipping. I smiled and offered the flyer, saying, "We're the mediation program. It's International Conflict Resolution Day." He refused to take the flyer, walking past me quickly.

"Keep it," he growled. Looking back over his shoulder having walked on few steps, he stopped, seeming to think he owed me an explanation. "I'm too conservative politically for mediation or conflict resolution." He continued walking.

I finally realized my arm was still outstretched with the flyer being offered to no one. Walking over to our literature table I said, "Nancy, he said he was too conservative for us." We looked at each other with question marks, shrugging our shoulders in unison.

The scene still bothers me. During the intervening five years I have thought off and on about the man who called himself *too conservative* for the work that we do. What did he mean? Is our work inherently anti-conservative? Should conflict resolution be assigned to a political camp? What caused him to be so sure that we were on opposite political sides?

Conservative

I looked up "conservatism" and found this: *1. commitment to traditional values and ideas with opposition to change or innovation or 2. the holding of political views that favor free enterprise, private ownership, and socially traditional ideas.*

In looking at definition number one, I considered tradition. Since where humans go, conflict will surely follow, if anything is traditional it is human conflict. Conflict resolution is neither traditional nor modern, I think. The practice of mediation, in modern society, is a young profession; it comes, though, from traditional and ancient human activities. The clan coming together to collaborate and work things out together. The wise elder helping feuding community members to talk and consider each other's perspective. The teacher, healer, or religious leader carefully asking questions to help quell hostilities and stitch rifts together.

I looked then at the second definition, referencing free enterprise and private ownership. If there is any throughline in mediation topics, it is that of private ownership. Landlords, business owners, consumers, and family estates are common concerns for mediation. Our work certainly relates to this aspect of conservatism. My recent mediations have related to summer renters and home owners, an outstanding bill for a business owner and an unhappy customer, and a post-divorce issue around the transfer of a business from once spouse to the other. Mediation is clearly a service that supports business and property disputes.

Liberal

In mediation and all conflict resolution practices, we are guided by the principle of self-determination. In considering the ideas of those within a conflict valuable and creating a process to preserve individual power, the practice might accurately be assigned to the liberal camp. I looked up “liberal” too. *1. willingness to respect or accept behavior or opinions different from one's own; openness to new ideas. 2. a political and social philosophy that promotes individual rights, civil liberties, democracy, and free enterprise.* The practice of mediation surely fits within the liberal camp. It is a practice of supporting individual rights and democracy and particularly helping those in a dispute to respect each other's ideas.

Maybe the disconnect with conservative thought is related to *how* conflicts are resolved. In history, as today, there are surely power hierarchies with leaders who impose decisions on others. When my ancestors arrived here having crossed the Atlantic, their internal disputes were resolved by those holding hierarchical power. When those in power considered a community member in the wrong, they placed them in the torturous stocks at the outskirts of town or banished them altogether. Not exactly the tradition to conserve, I think.

My ancestors arriving to New England took property from the indigenous residents—not exactly in sync with today's definition of “conservative” regarding private ownership. What my ancestors missed, with their culture of superiority and colonialism, was the traditional and conservative Wampanoag Native American efforts, working to keep their cultural traditions and connection with the land, and to preserve longstanding methods of collaborative conflict resolution.

Circle of concern

When we meet with participants in mediation, we introduce the idea of fairness. We draw a circle and place the disputants within it and ask them to consider the other's perspective. The process is not assignable to either team, liberal or conservative. It's a human process, very specific to those involved.

In thinking of the man from five years ago, I wish I could have had a longer conversation. I thank him for the interaction, short though it was. He could have walked right on without considering my presence, leaving me with nothing to ponder. Instead, he turned back to tell me about how he saw his identity and his analysis of his beliefs. In doing so, he offered me a gift. It was a gift of fairness and acknowledgement, however fleeting.

When he filled in the blanks, telling me what he thought I needed to know, he extended his circle of concern to include me. For just that moment, Mr. Conservative cast his gaze on someone he didn't know and immediately saw as *other*. His daily routine being disturbed, he, instead of ignoring me, offered an explanation. When he turned back to explain himself, he seemed to be displaying the universal human instinct for fairness toward others, considering my feelings and need for explanation.

Not too conservative for what we do at all, I think.