



Mediation Musings: Money, Money, Money, Money

Sara Barnes

Money. It's likely to bring up immediate reactions. I've had a mixed-status life regarding attitudes about money. One of my parents came from the hands-off, polite-people-don't-discuss money perspective. The other parent saw discussing money as fair game—"I got this at fifty percent off on sale!" As a teen I became aware of friends whose lives were impacted by the ever-present stressors of generational and situational poverty. In my twenties I was part of a collective where pooling our money was expected: *What's mine is yours.*

Money and culture—an interesting and diverse mix. We often trip over each other's unstated money rules. What's normal for one person is uncomfortable for another when it comes to talking about money. We regularly see this in conflict resolution when issues of money arise. The individual's cultural expectations, experiences, and lifelong learning have a strong impact upon their budgeting, negotiating, agreements, defining priorities, and saving and spending money. Both transactional and relational conflicts often find discussions of money as rocky and treacherous terrain.

When we expand the money viewfinder from the individual to societal, the money topic leads to differing opinions. As I write this it is Election Eve. Here in Vineyard Haven, ballot questions ask the electorate to weigh in on money issues. Q1: *Should we have higher earners pay more taxes to support schools and roads?* Q2: *Should insurance companies be required to spend a high proportion on services?* Q5: *Should restaurants be able to sell liquor up to 35% of their receipts?* As members of a community, state, and nation, we find that these kinds of questions prick at our money attitudes in diverse ways.

It shouldn't be this hard.

When I was growing up there was a poster: ***It will be a great day when our schools get all the money they need, and the Air Force has to hold a bake sale to buy a bomber.*** It was toward the end of the Vietnam War, and I was just becoming aware of national and local economics. As I became a teacher, school administrator, mother, and mediator I've often thought about economic priorities. Why do necessary services such as food banks, social services, rescue organizations, and others, like community mediation programs, have to raise money? Shouldn't these needed services come from the public coffers?

Raising money takes time away from doing what needs to be done. Here in our mediation center, like so many nonprofits, municipal functions, and charitable endeavors, we spend an estimated 15–20% of our time dealing with writing, managing, and researching grants and other funding opportunities. We're not that good at it—I hear the same from others in the helping fields as they assess their talents. We do the best we can, working with the resources we have, asking our staff and volunteers to be creative, do more with less, and stay committed to the cause. Then we can get back to doing the work we love, providing coaching, mediation, facilitation, courses, and other processes to unclog the gunk of conflict.

It doesn't have to be this hard.

I've been working with mediators across the globe on international projects. Some countries are far behind us with regard to normalizing and strengthening the use of dispute resolution and mediation. My French colleagues look at the concept of community mediation with awe and hope for the day when they can have something like what we have here in Massachusetts. In other countries, mediation and dispute resolution are incorporated into the governmental fabric of services for all. We look at those places' commitment to these services with envy and hope for the day when our state or country will see fit to fully fund community mediation centers so that more folks can access these services to retain their power and ability to participate in deciding what is fair and just.



Pitch for donations

So, here's the pitch. It's time for our annual donation campaign. When this time rolls around every year, I have to tell the truth: we groan. We know that some of us will have to put the time aside to write the letters, pull the donor list together, troll the possibilities for new folks to ask. We haven't resorted to bake sales yet. I wish I didn't have to say this. I'm asking. Will you make some kind of contribution, no matter how small, to our work? We have two areas of particular need this year:

- *working with parents with high conflict and empty pockets*
- *providing low or no-cost support to small businesses and nonprofits who have internal workplace conflict.*

Here's what you get for your donation. A promise. We will do what we can to squeeze everything out of each dollar. All our work is confidential, so you can't see the results. I hope, though, you believe me when I report that even though you can't know the details, there will be parents, employees, local community members who come our way with need for our help. We will do our level best to make a difference as they slog their way from unresolved conflicts toward mutual understanding. You can count on us to do our work with pride and principle. Thanks, in anticipation, for your financial help. Our ultimate goal—***an Island of competent, capable and effective conflict resolvers***—is well within our reach.