



Mediation Musings: *The Wave*

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The one-lane wooded road was bumpy and rutted. Fifteen miles an hour was about top speed. Around the corner came a car; it swiftly pulled over in anticipation of our passing each other. As I drove past, I saw a movement in my peripheral vision. I turned to see that they were waving at me. I limply lifted my hand, confused.

The next time I was on the road, when I saw a car coming toward me, I followed the model. I pulled over, let the other person pass and waved as they went by. They quickly waved back. I thought, “We’re definitely not in Brooklyn anymore.” Although the ritual was an unfamiliar set of moves, it seemed friendly and kind to wave at each other. Pulling over to let someone go was easy, though sometimes there was nowhere to do this and I had to count on the other person to do it first.

Since I now have been driving down this same unpaved, sandy and variously smooth or potholed road regularly, I have 10 years of experience with these interactions. The little ballet of the cars, and the drivers, the smile, wave and move-on-down-the-road is a familiar custom. When I go back to Brooklyn, I miss it, though you would [never get anywhere](#) in the city if you had to acknowledge everyone. I think of this wave as a *Thanks for helping me out and making way for us both to travel on with our day wave*.

Once in a while I interact with a driver clearly unfamiliar with the road or the custom. They might follow along and wave back to me, and I see the confusion of [the wave](#) that I had once upon a time. Rarely, someone just looks straight forward, ignoring the extra effort I am making, driving off quickly, and I am left unacknowledged. This causes me to be grouchy—I find myself yelling, “You’re supposed to wave!”



I see you

On the paved two-lane street where I live, [I do the wave](#) as I pass other drivers, walkers and bike riders—and sometimes people working in their yard. When I am working in my yard I wave to all who pass me if I have a hand free. I do this on my street but nowhere else within the six island towns of Martha's Vineyard.

This wave is a bit different than the one when a person pulls aside to help the other go past. I think of this wave as the acknowledgement and acceptance of each person who passes through the little community. It's a *Welcome to our neighborhood, I see you and I hope you are well, hello* type of a courtesy. It also says, "We are not anonymous here—it's a small micro village on our road and there are real people here [who are humans](#) to each other and who are aware of one another."

Though out on the larger and busier roadways, I notice other types of *I see you* waves. These seem to be between people who work in similar trades—plumbers wave at plumbers, excavators at other excavators, and I think some of the landscapers seem to wave, flash their lights or even do a quick honk. *I see you* is a nice interaction; I like it. As we go through our day, it's good to know [that someone else](#), even for a brief moment, noticed our existence and was benignly pleased with the encounter. It puts a few drops in the cup labeled "Today Is a Nice Day" while somehow simultaneously helping to evaporate a couple of drops in the "Today Sucks" cup.



The kids' optimistic wave

I was recently on a cruise in the Irish Sea off the coast of Wales (just the sentence makes me smile). I was on the deck facing the port we were sailing out from. All these pleasure boats filled with families were out enjoying the Saturday afternoon sunshine. Four of them were accompanying us on our journey southward, and everyone on the little boats was facing the cruise ship.

Two little kids glanced up at me standing at the railing—well, they were probably looking at dozens of others who were looking out, but I took it personally. They waved vigorously. I felt almost a moral imperative to wave back; it would have taken some existential grouchiness to not reply. Soon the adults waved, too. Then other boats were filled with wavers. I leaned out over the railing to look up, and there were many other cruisers waving at the indistinct figures of the boaters. I stuck with the waving as long as it felt expected and made sure to not stop while any children were waving.

What's this all about? I'll never see these folks again, but it did feel that I owed them acknowledgement and reciprocity. *The wave to children* seems in a sub-category of its own. Maybe we know that children would benefit from seeing that other humans are good and friendly and kind. That they see and value children. That we were once children, and someone waved at us. Or that we get to be carefree children again, just for the interaction, waving at strangers, wishing them well, [sharing humanity together](#) with no thought of an ongoing connection.



Urban waves

I'm aware that the waves I've written about so far seem to be grounded in rural life and once-in-a-lifetime travel experiences. Most of my life was spent in urban spaces and classrooms and offices and much more congested environments. Does the wave apply at all there? I think so.

As we walked into work we said hi, did a quick wave, nod, fist bump or a rhetorical inquiry, "You good?" That's a form of the wave, I think. On the subway, when I was pregnant, bench sitters would half lift up to offer their seat, wordlessly saying, "I see your situation, and you might need this more than me." Holding the door. A smile in passing. Putting your arm out to stop unwitting pedestrians—tourists—from crossing into oncoming bikes or trucks. Calling behind someone, "You dropped something," when it happens. There's a phenomenon I have heard

of called the bodega wave, of people waving to the store owners as they pass by on their way to school or work, every day, the same place acknowledging each other's existence. One thing about busy city life, when you see someone who you know, you definitely say hi—it may be a long time before you run into them again. There are absolutely urban types of [the wave](#).



Wave Components

Let's look at the components of the wave and deconstruct how I think it helps to create less conflict: 1) Be aware; 2) Help others; 3) Acknowledge others; 4) Say "Thanks."

1. Be aware of your surroundings

Driving down a one-lane road requires more awareness compared to the customary two-lane paved roads. The ruts and variation mean you have to be careful, go slowly and drive with intention. When I go slow, I can see whatever is around me and can adjust. On the off chance my mind is elsewhere or I'm going too fast, I'm apt to miss the oncoming car. It's happened a few times—one time when both of us drivers must have had minds that were elsewhere, our front bumpers ended up within inches, adrenaline triggered.

We all have times when our mind is in a fog, or when we are only thinking about ourselves. Conflicts can arise in these moments, when we are missing the cues and not anticipating the road ahead and the possibility that we will need to adjust to others who are going in the opposite direction. High stress can cause tunnel vision and reduce peripheral vision; it's a physical response that can create conflict. The more we do to manage stress through sleep, exercise, meditation, spending time with friends and loved ones and/or in nature, the more chance we will be at our best and taking in whatever comes our way.

And as a reminder about cultural assumptions, there are some places in the world—I've never lived in any of these places—where a wave would not be welcomed at all. Being aware would include knowing these [varied customs](#).

2. Help others automatically

You can orient yourself to step aside and let others ahead of you, and for those oriented toward being competitive, this may be difficult. The idea is this: If everyone pulled to the side and automatically created space for the person who is passing, it would spread goodwill. Humans mirror each other, and you can be pretty sure that your gesture will be repeated by the receiver just a little way up the road, out of your sight. You don't need to know anything about the person passing, just to extend a belief in the humanity and worth of everyone on the road. Everyone needs to be helped and considered as they are going along to get along. The roads, sidewalks, social media, workplaces, etc. are the democratizer for all of us; it's what we do to reduce conflict that is within our power.

3. Acknowledge others

It is so easy to pass right by and miss that micro-opportunity to demonstrate that you see the person right in front of you. Everyone is buoyed by being known and appreciated, it's a win-win. When you [smile at others](#), the effect comes back to you, the wave ripples out and encompasses you, too. We are all better prepared for the challenges each day brings when we have been seen and known and belong. Even if we never interact again, like the bees carrying messages back to the hive for the others to know which way to go, we may not be individually advantaged by the effect of our positivity—but the colony, or in humanspeak, community, will benefit from the smallest of welcoming gestures.

4. Thank people when they help you

“Of course I thank people when they help me,” you might be saying. “This component is not necessary to point out, we all know it.” And I agree that for most people, when an obvious pulling-over-to-let-us-pass move has happened, we would remember to wave our thanks. My additional thought is, when you do these things, you are helping to proactively resolve conflicts or at least spread mutuality among others so they will be open to others and their differences, perspectives and ways of being. Stopping conflict before it starts.

The idea is, if we are looking to reduce conflict and [spread a little sunshine](#), we could all look for more places to show gratitude. It's the wave's ripple effect as conflict resolution methodology. When I encounter folks doing customer service, like at the post office or grocery store, I don't always remember, but when I do, I say something nice to them, ask how the day is going, commiserate with how hard their job is and tell them thanks for helping me. It's a wave to counteract the possible mistreatment, dehumanizing or unthinkingly diminishing actions of some, not all, others.

Simple gestures to prevent conflict

As mediators, we are used to conflicts that have already been created and are causing problems in the lives of our mediation participants. Arbitrators and judges make judgments about defined and articulated conflicts using precedent examples. Conflict coaches work with folks to expand their conflict management repertoires, based on their conflict experiences. Government bodies and elected officials make decisions to resolve existing challenges for their residents. Laws are drafted by legislators and refined through legal rulings as a framework for deciding existing or predicted problems. My point is that most thinking about conflict resolution is about solving existing conflicts, conflicts that are already born and causing havoc.

What if we put some more effort into avoiding and preventing conflict by spreading a little acknowledgement? What if we focused on helping other people to reduce their stress levels and helped them to remember about the good in other people? My example of this is *the wave* and other gestures of goodwill. I am granting you an unlimited bushel basket of these gestures; use them generously and with optimism. I'll wave back.



https://www.youtube.com/shorts/Z_TvVXKJQLo
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ls8FKhS178>



Note about another type of *the wave*

I wanted to work in the [athletic arena wave](#) phenomenon, but I couldn't fit it into my premise. So I'll leave it to readers to think about how this [choreography](#) spreads conflict resolution and improves the world one wave at a time.

Wave

Webster's dictionary defines a wave as: "a disturbance or variation that transfers energy progressively from point to point in a medium and that may take the form of an elastic deformation or of a variation of pressure, electric or magnetic intensity, electric potential, or temperature."

Synonyms for *wave* depend on its meaning, but can include *ripple*, *surge* and *billow* for the water-related noun, and *signal*, *beckon* and *gesture* for the verb related to moving a hand or arm. Other related words for the noun include *undulation*, *swell* and *breaker*, while other verb forms include *flutter*, *shake*, and *oscillate*.

"Wave" as slang can mean a period of success or good fortune, as in to "ride the wave." It can also mean to be cool, stylish, or mellow, as in the term "wavy," which was popularized in early 2000s hip-hop. Finally, in the context of surfing, "wave" refers to the natural phenomenon of moving water, and a whole separate set of slang terms describe different types of waves and surfing maneuvers.

Waving is a [nonverbal communication](#) gesture that consists of the movement of the [hand](#) and/or entire arm that people commonly use to [greet](#) each other, but it can also be used to say goodbye, acknowledge another's presence, call for silence or deny someone.^[1] The wave gesture is an essential element of human language.^[2]

In Western culture, waving is a known gesture that means "hello" or "goodbye." That gesture can also be used to call the attention of someone, for example waving down a taxi, or waving at a friend from a great distance. That gesture could be interpreted differently and have a different meaning or even be highly offensive in South Korea, Nigeria, Greece, Bulgaria, Latin American countries, India, Japan, and other places.^{[14][15][16][17][18]}