

WHAT YOU SEE IS WHAT YOU GET

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MEDIATION & CULTURAL DIVERSITY – RECONCILING PERSPECTIVES

As I ponder what could possibly be new or helpful to say about mediation and cultural diversity, I am struck by my desire to know who my audience is. Professional mediators and members of NCMA, yes. But beyond that level of identity, who is actually listening? What are you listening for? What mindset and collection of experiences and expectations are you listening from? My intention is to participate in an ongoing dialogue that helps all of us more consciously and effectively hold a space for issues of cultural diversity to show up in our practices. And I am most curious about what shift in consciousness would be required for all of us to see through diversity lenses all of the time.

I'll begin with reflections on where mediation and cultural diversity overlap:

MEDIATION: Although I have yet to see a universally accepted definition of mediation, I suggest it always includes this: it is a *guided process for understanding and reconciling different perspectives to help people reach common ground.*

CULTURE: While culture is a similarly elusive concept to define, it informs and shapes our perspectives. Culture is that mostly unidentified and unexamined web of influences that cuts and grinds our lenses of perception from which we derive “*the way things work around here.*” Culture sets the context and rules within which transactions at issue in a dispute take place.

DIVERSITY: Being diverse is a quality of being different. Where we differ is often also where we have conflict. Stopping the conflict is going to be either about making the difference go underground (controlling, disallowing, disfavoring, dis-empowering, disrespecting it) or else by accepting, even embracing, aspects of the difference to create and consider a pool of options for a solution that works for everyone concerned. Diversity awareness is then about having that difference become a resource for creativity, connection, and mutually enriching meaning.

It seems to me that the vision for mediation and cultural diversity awareness are fundamentally about the same thing: *holding the paradox of “both/and” and holding a space for the dignity of acceptance and mutually empowering choice.* From where we differ or are different, we can bridge the gap and come together to create wholeness and restore harmony.

How perfectly virtuous and utopian that may sound!

What happens in the messy world of antagonism and violence—especially around volatile and painful issues of identity, belonging, domination, and self-determination that often characterize cultural diversity conflicts—seems impossibly distant from those concepts or that vision. Nevertheless, it is a vision that can inspire us and give us direction.



COACHING FOR LEADERSHIP AND COLLABORATIVE EXCELLENCE

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REINTEGRATING CULTURAL DIVERSITY – ESSENTIAL THREADS

I notice a tendency in our culture and in our profession to separate out cultural diversity awareness from the rest of who we are and what we do. In the world of conflict resolution, our tenuous understanding of cultural diversity issues tends to become apparent in how we handle power imbalances. Separating “cultural diversity” out may give it emphasis and a certain measure of legitimacy. The idea may be to place cultural diversity awareness securely within the realm of core competency items. The practice I have observed, however, is that cultural diversity awareness may be mentioned as a core competency, but it is largely given lip service. In other words, it does not become a substantive “performance evaluation” item, not like awareness of tax law, environmental regulations or contractual norms do. Separating it out also invites those who would otherwise not be inclined to deal with it, to ignore it as a “specialty” that does not affect them.

I see the need for reintegrating cultural diversity awareness as an essential thread running through the weave of all our work and interactions. These are issues of how we interact with one another, the very core of what makes the mediation process different and meaningful. I also see the need to perceive these issues with greater depth and subtlety of inquiry. That is to say, there is more to cultural diversity than meets the eye. The dynamics, influences and consequences are not always black vs. white and obvious.

Perhaps it will help you to know where I am listening from. I live a “both/and” reality every day in a world that insists on “either/or.” One meaningful example of this is my physical presence. Someone encountering me for the first time sees a tall woman present in a fair-skinned body. I look like and am treated as a White woman. My immediate lineage is both German and African American, and it wasn’t long ago that that fact would have legally meant I was “Black” regardless of what you see.

Inclusion, exclusion, belonging, safety, and dignity are first set at face value. I am proudly a blend and don’t squarely fit into any “Black” or “White” categorization. The practice and consequences of “passing” in the United States have changed in my lifetime but have by no means become obsolete. To be of mixed-race heritage is only slowly becoming a recognized option in certain arenas of discourse. The counting done in the U.S. for any official purpose, however, still requires an either/or designation. This is true for all classifications that are not the dominant norm. The apparent truth of who I see I am and who you see I am can matter profoundly in all realms of our social existence.

In some way or other we all embody diversity. Consider the yin-yang symbol. The black and white patches are constantly revolving, each patch containing a patch of the other. Both patches are complementary and necessary partners interacting to form a higher synthesis, rather than being irreconcilable and eternally warring opposites.

We all are the product of a rich and diverse heritage – whether ethnic, spiritual, linguistic, ideological, etc. That is the nature of life! We all—at some time(s) in our lives—have suffered the experience of being disrespected, demonized, dehumanized, dis-empowered, trivialized, made invisible, or otherwise excluded and demeaned on the basis of seemingly arbitrary criteria. That experience which may have given us the greatest pain can be our greatest resource. It is the place from which we can meet with compassion. It is the place from which we can choose to listen with ears that hear the truth of another person’s experience and perspective.



OUR WILLINGNESS TO LOOK AGAIN

We all know what it feels like to be respected: start there. The English word “respect” comes from the Latin word “respectare” which means to look again. The willingness to look again and see with new eyes.

I have worked together with fellow mediators and parties who have posed the following challenge to me: *What can you possibly understand about my experience or that of my people?! You’re not like me and you’re not one of us. You have nothing to say about my, or our, experience.*

To this I respond: *Maybe you’re right. I cannot possibly know all there is to know about the complexity of experience one individual has or a people have of racism or any other form of oppression, discrimination, or separation. Maybe your perspective will change if you know that, despite what you think you see, I am one of you. But more than that, I am genuinely curious about your experience. I am prepared to listen to your story as you share it. What can be enough so that I help you shift the situation you are struggling with now? I know from my own experience how important it is to get to the other side, whole. If you are open and speak of what is true for you, what we learn and can share may help you.*

The mantra that has consistently helped me in my practice is: **breathe, be centered, listen**. Listen for the music between the notes. Listen for words unspoken. Listen for the subtle levels of what is happening. Listen for guidance.

What you see is what you get. That is to say: what you perceive is what you may understand. And that is what you will work with.

ABOUT BEATA C. LEWIS, JD, MSC:

Beata Lewis partners with business owners, senior leaders, and knowledge professionals to evolve and attain leadership goals and revitalized collaboration with new levels of effectiveness and growth. As founder of Bridging Lives LLC and leveraging decades’ experience as an Executive Coach, Mediator, and Change Consultant, she helps clients navigate organizational complexity and emergent issues, cultivate engagement for diverse teams, and achieve critical business objectives. She works with organizations meeting the challenges of growth and change, especially in regenerating collaboration where it breaks down, due to lapses in communication, negotiation, conflict resolution, collaborative process, and agreement structuring. Blending the essential inner and outer games of leadership development, Beata guides clients to translate new awareness into clear goals, compelling strategies, and tangible practices for next-level success. Beata’s coaching uniquely integrates systemic thinking, interpersonal dynamics, and conversational intelligence with somatic practices so clients fine-tune and authentically embody changes for positive impact. Cultivating greater agility, trust, and resilience, Beata’s clients refine their capacity to risk difficult conversations, move beyond limiting obstacles, and leverage personal power for mutual gain and fulfillment.

