

9

Three to Tango: Reflections of a Mediator

By Johnston Barkat



When India was partitioned in 1947, my mother was living with her brother in Agra, India, and my father was living in Sialkot, in the Punjab region, in an area that had become Pakistan during one of history's greatest mass migrations, involving displacement of 15 million people and mutual genocide costing the lives of more than one million people. The effects are still felt in the region, with continuing clashes over the disputed territory of Kashmir and lack of

Johnston Barkat is an internationally recognized expert in the field of mediation and preventive diplomacy who also advises companies on corporate social responsibility. He serves as the mediator for the International Monetary Fund and previously served as assistant secretary-general heading the United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Service. At the United Nations, he served as a moderator and negotiator to help achieve international consensus to reduce hydrofluorocarbons, which was agreed upon in October 2016 in Kigali, Rwanda. He also chaired the interagency effort to develop a systemwide Mental Health Strategy and continues to serve on the UN steering committee that developed a global action plan to reduce violence caused by religious extremism. Barkat has taught negotiation and mediation at Columbia University and has had leadership roles in the Association for Conflict Resolution and the International Ombudsman Association. He is a fellow of the American Bar Foundation and also received the Front Line Champion Award, presented to those who have made a significant impact on the field of mediation and have helped others through their commitment to the effective practice of mediation. He received his PhD from Columbia University, an MPA from Pace University, and a BA from The King's College.

clear progress toward peace. In August 2018, Pakistan's foreign minister expressed that he was hoping for eventual progress and resumption of peace talks with India, but that "it takes two to tango."

It was amid the post-partition aftershocks that my parents married in 1955. Seeking a place to pursue education and start their life together, my father ended up coming to the United States in 1958 to study at Tennessee Temple University. My mother, a nurse, sold her gold wedding jewelry—a big sacrifice from an Indian perspective—so that my father could travel ahead to continue his studies and establish himself in the United States. Eventually, when I was 2, my parents moved to affluent Westchester County, New York, where my father began teaching psychology at a nondenominational religious college. This was where I eventually received my undergraduate degree.

Life and history did not place me in a clear identity group. I cannot remember many other people of color attending my largely homogenous school, and our town did not have a significant Indian or Pakistani community. While one might assume that this made me feel like an outsider, I felt at home and at ease. After all, it was essentially all I knew. In hindsight, the fact that my school had no significant minority representation probably facilitated my acceptance by others, who felt no real threat. As a result, I felt as accepted, or not, as any other child would be in that community and that school—on issues other than my heritage or skin color.

Our family was Christian, and as a result I attended a rather conservative college with separate male and female dorms and prohibitions against smoking, drinking, and even dancing. However, it was only about 40 minutes from New York City, which clearly had more progressive and liberal views of the world. Also, I was raised in a house that was the home base for many guests and visitors from

around the world, which helped introduce me to other religions and ways of life. An interest in different countries and cultures was also sparked by travel with my family during summers and my father's sabbaticals. So even my conservative religious upbringing—where litmus-test behaviors such as drinking and smoking were frowned upon—was continually challenged. Most importantly, making regular trips to—and then living and working in—New York City exposed me to a mosaic of people from all backgrounds and reinforced my belief that no matter how different, people can find ways to live as neighbors or even friends.

I think my ability to take pleasure in finding connection and commonality with people who differed along religious and racial lines might have been an important factor in sowing the seeds that eventually drew me to mediation. While pursuing a master's degree, I met a classmate who was preparing to become a mediator. I was re-evaluating my career path at the time, and the idea of being someone who bridged divides matched my abilities and resonated deeply with my values.

My first mediation training consisted of a two-week-end course designed to prepare participants to serve as community and court mediators. Like most basic mediation courses, it laid out a series of moves to guide aspiring peacemakers, like steps to a basic box-step dance, in the framework of a two-party mediation in which both sides politely follow those steps. Then, after a period of co-mediation, mediators were launched into the courts and community to help provide a forum for the fair resolution of disputes. Community and court mediation was like going to boot camp. Cases involving all imaginable issues, people, and temperaments were presented to a mediator who had been shown the basic steps to a dance he hadn't mastered.

I remember one of my first cases. The year was 1995. It was late in the day, and I had been mediating for nearly

two hours. The parties were a woman of color and a White man, neighbors in a high-density apartment building in Yonkers, New York. I envisioned a linear process: each side would tell his or her story, and I would reframe the issues, leading to a transformative problem-solving discussion. But the case had taken an unusual turn since our last session. The woman had found chicken bones and feathers at her front door, and she was petrified. Trembling with fear, she accused her neighbor in no uncertain terms of placing a hex on her. The man unleashed his views about her “Third World culture,” how she was “uneducated and stupid” and a “hysterical woman.” She responded in turn. Things quickly spiraled out of control.

While I did my best to hold the parties to the ground rules and ask open-ended questions, I was not prepared to handle the degree of offense and animosity between them or their rapidly escalating emotions. There I was, a relatively new mediator, trying to contain screaming parties and dealing with issues of race, social status, power, culture, religion, cultural beliefs, and sexism. The basic introductory steps I had been taught to conduct a mediation seemed woefully inadequate for dealing with real life heightened by conflict.

The situation reminds me of when I first tried dancing salsa socially after only six months of lessons. As I watched the couples moving smoothly on the floor, I realized that the classes allowed me to replicate steps I had learned but did not equip me to incorporate any artistry, style, or improvisation into my movement. I was essentially robotic in a situation requiring intuitive creativity. Mediators, likewise, have to respond quickly and creatively to unpredictable situations.

Having experienced the potential of mediation and my own limitations, I realized that I wanted to learn more than a few prescribed steps to the basic dance. I reflected that if

I wanted to be a more effective mediator, I needed to learn why people fight, what their defense mechanisms are, what makes people intractable, how their biases form, and what draws them into destructive conflict cycles. Knowing that, I reasoned, would enable me to find more creative ways to extricate people from their conflicts and help them plot new, more productive paths.

I ended up pursuing my doctorate in the social-organizational psychology department at Columbia University and studying with Morton Deutsch. Deutsch, often credited as the father of conflict resolution theory, was the director of the International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution at Teachers College. Mort was a skilled mentor, and he treated students and colleagues alike with respect and kindness.

My doctorate was structured in such a way that I also had to qualify in a second academic area, so I studied in the international transcultural department under my other mentor, Gita Steiner-Khamsi. Through Gita's strong international experience, I deepened my understanding of the transference of learning across cultures.

Guided by such mentors and a combination of both areas of study, I became immersed in historical international case studies and experimental psychological research that helped me deepen my understanding of why people get into conflict, what barriers inhibit resolution, and what role culture plays in the equation. For the first time, I began to feel as if I could move beyond the basic steps of the mediation dance to a more advanced level where I could draw on deeper knowledge, improvise more, and handle a broader range of more complex and unpredictable cases.

At the time, I was working as an ombudsman at Pace University, helping resolve conflicts involving students, faculty, and staff. Apart from the usual academic and inter-

personal conflicts, a university is fertile ground for almost any conflict—not only internal ones, but political ones originating from as far as the Middle East.

In 2002, controversies erupted about the construction of a wall between Israel and Palestine, and throughout the world groups polarized in support of, or opposition to, the wall. I was asked to moderate a community town hall meeting on the issue. Knowing how such meetings can sometimes devolve into incendiary political statements and verbal assaults with people demonizing those who take other views, I struggled to come up with an approach to allow voices to be heard, prevent escalation and violence, and create conditions in which the sides might be able to hear and perhaps learn from each other. I adopted a model from Laura Chasin at the Public Conversation Project (now called Essential Partners), who had long experience bringing women together from opposing sides of the pro-life/pro-choice debate in Boston. Laura and I had frequently discussed her work, and I was intrigued by how we might use elements of her model in such a potentially volatile situation (Chasin, Herzig, Roth, Chasin, Becker, and Stains, 1996).

On the day of the event, in addition to local participants, protesters representing both the Israeli and Palestinian perspectives, all of whom felt passionate about the situation, were bused in. Once inside, participants self-segregated, sitting on opposite sides of an aisle, much like the relatives of the bride and groom at a wedding, to hear a panel present different views of the conflict. An open town-hall-style time for questions followed the presentations. I asked the participants to avoid making political statements, frame their contributions in the form of a question, ask what they were genuinely curious to learn from the other side's perspective, and be mindful of time to allow as many people as possible to participate. When introduc-

ing the method, I explained that the idea was not to quash the passion of viewpoints but to channel it toward productive communication so people could not only express their own concerns but could genuinely hear those of the other side. As participants approached the microphones with their index cards, staff from my office helped them frame their questions, and then each participant had a moment at the microphone. Throughout the event, I tried to keep the group focused on the core issue from the questioner by reframing the essence of their concern.

I don't claim the process worked perfectly—it was a tense meeting. The discussions were sometimes heated, and the arguments were strong, but we got through the event with no violence, minimal grandstanding, and perhaps even a little learning. Later, we were asked to repeat the event, which gave us an opportunity to try to refine the approach.

Regardless of what method we use to mediate or moderate conflict, understanding more than the basic steps of mediation is critical. We need to understand at a deeper level what dynamics and processes create conflict or inhibit their resolution so that we can choose the right tools and process for each conflict. A process that helps participants frame their questions on index cards may work in a public dialogue hosted by a US university but may not be the right strategy with two neighbors from a high-density housing project in Yonkers who are screaming at each other. With experience and a deeper study of conflict and its resolution, mediation improvisation and artistry became easier to incorporate in meaningful and effective ways, providing me with the agility to respond both substantively and creatively but with consistent results.

As I continued to hone my craft, I found myself increasingly mediating at the intersection of culture and religion. Life also brought these lessons home in very real

ways during that same time. The period after the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, was a tense time for the world. It also became a time I first felt a sense of dread about the violence that can erupt in the aftermath of such events. People were expressing their outrage to anyone who looked remotely “Middle Eastern,” and the verbal and personal attacks were escalating. My fear was not for myself. I was keenly aware that my young daughters, despite the Germanic features of their mother, also inherited South Asian coloring and the features of my side of the family. With every incident I read about, I became more and more concerned and aware how vulnerable they were to the potentially displaced anger from all of those who felt violated by the attacks. Walking down the street with them became an anxious experience for me internally, while I struggled to maintain a lighthearted facade for my daughters. This experience sometimes resurfaces when I am involved in mediating conflicts involving directed anger and hatred toward cultural, ethnic, or religious groups. It gives me a very personal touchstone to empathize with such situations, which can often start with small incidents and escalate quickly.

Years later, having accrued experience with hundreds of cases as an ombudsman as well as a court and community mediator, I ended up working for international organizations such as the United Nations and the International Monetary Fund and mediating for related agencies, economic commissions, peacekeeping missions and programs such as the UN Environment Program and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime. Accordingly, mediation practice regularly involved people in different countries and often from different religious groups or ethnicities.

The role of religious and cultural identity was strikingly clear in a challenging mediation I conducted in South Central Asia. In the spring of 2013, I was approached about

a longstanding, seemingly intractable conflict among about 70 people in a politically sensitive and volatile region of the world. The nationals of the country were at odds with the local leaders of an international organization who were trying to implement changes that were perceived to infringe on rights long enjoyed by the locals.

It was an intriguing proposition. The case had festered for months, gradually worsening over time, with other resolution attempts proving futile. Anticipating that I might spend some time in that region, I decided not to shave in order to appear more familiar. Soon I had a salt-and-pepper beard that would make any Brooklyn hipster envious. Eventually, arrangements were finalized for me to mediate. After traveling halfway around the world by plane, Learjet, helicopter, and finally, armored vehicle, I found myself in one of the most dangerous places in the world with a seemingly impossible task. Due to the volatility of the situation, I was assigned a protective detail.

Fortunately, I had included one of my most senior staff members on the trip, which cut the interview time with the group in half. While the issues predictably involved people feeling disrespected because they felt that their input and views were not adequately considered, we soon found an additional dimension. While most of the group were from the same religion (Islam), they were divided along sectarian, denominational, and nationality lines. What looked from the outside like a homogeneous group with a common religion from the same region could be viewed through another lens as diverse, fractious, and potentially explosive.

After interviewing each individual, we gathered about 25 representatives in a small conference room. The group was tense, and several forcefully articulated their grievances. At one point one of the men banged the table, his body shaking, and yelled out that the object of his anger

“was acting against the prophet and against Islam.” The disputants were angry, and their rhetoric was escalating and tugging on religious trigger-terms. This was not two neighbors arguing over noise and chicken bones. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the hand of my protective guard move toward his firearm. As the tension in the room quickly escalated, my protector leaned toward me and whispered in my ear, “Sir, it may be a good idea to leave the room. They are getting too agitated.”

From his perspective he was right. I considered this for a moment, though, and whispered back, “Not yet.”

Fortunately, I had more experience to draw on than in my fledgling days and was able to engage in a constant back-and-forth, ensuring that the representatives knew I heard and understood them, validating their emotions, and reframing their language and accusations in ways that felt true to them but changed the tenor and focus of the exchange. I knew better how to leverage the power of the mediator and better understood how to distinguish those moments that required a strong intervention from ones that benefited from letting the parties vent. When their anger needed to be aired, I was able to recognize that this was a necessary stage to express their frustration before more constructive stages could begin. And I also recognized that there was an element at play where those designated as the negotiators needed to show their constituents that they were committed to taking the opposition to task. This was also done in a very specific cultural context with its own norms. In that context, righteous anger and the drama of the debate were a part of the negotiation dance. Slowly the tension in the room began to diminish. In the end, we were able to get the parties to redirect their focus from the people across the table to the issues they were frustrated by.

The sessions continued for several more days and ended with all parties signing a mediation agreement. I asked them how they would seal an agreement in their culture. They said first they would mark and seal the agreement with a religious prayer and then they would sacrifice a goat and prepare a feast to share together. I paused, struggling to suppress images of a goat being slaughtered, and agreed to their proposal. Fortunately, our helicopter had to leave too soon for them to arrange the sacrifice, and the goat lived to see at least another day. But we did mark the agreement with a ceremonial prayer. That symbolic prayer became an important part of the agreement, for in that moment the conflicting parties who began with so much anger came together united around their area of commonality.

Part of me is tempted to let the story end here, leading a reader to believe that my mediation skills were exceptional. But mediation is also a great profession in which to learn humility. I'll never forget the conversation with a team of three representatives who approached me the night before we reached that agreement.

"Sir," they said, "We have watched you carefully and thank you for bringing us this far in our negotiations. We have agreed to resolve this issue if you think it is best." And before I could let any of this go to my head, they added, "Because you have a white beard, in our culture this means you are wise. Everyone has agreed to accept the agreement if you think it is fair." Nothing brings you down to earth more quickly than being told that a mediation was successful, in part, because your beard game was strong.

In this case, as often in my practice, I struggled to adapt my Western mediation training to a culture that understood mediation differently. As much as I tried to minimize my role and have the parties negotiate their interests, it became evident to me that they saw the mediator as similar to a village elder. In such situations, the elder

might try to ensure that interests are expressed and met, but ultimately the parties want the elder to approve their agreement. In essence, this gives them permission to forgive, to save face, and let go of the conflict. So finally, when the parties had crafted an agreement that met all their interests, they came to me and said it was acceptable—provided I agreed it was a good solution. After much internal struggle, I told them what I felt it addressed and what I felt might still need to be worked on, and then I indicated it was a good resolution. It was all they needed to hear, and they happily embraced their agreement. There are times, such as in this instance, that people need permission to move from fighting to *détente*. For the mediator, knowing when and how to differentiate the moments when the parties decide from those when the mediator directs or gives permission can be critical. In this case I was looking for an approach that addressed their interests while also finding a way for them to move on from the conflict and save face.

In every case I mediate—whether successful or not—I learn much about people who are in conflict, how to improve my practice, and even a lot about myself. The focus on myself as a mediator is not a self-indulgent exercise. The process of self-reflection is a tool to sharpen my skills and become a more effective mediator. When I co-mediate, I always take time to debrief and seek feedback from my co-mediator on what I could have done better. And when I mediate alone, as is most often the case, I also frequently survey participants and ask for feedback on what worked and what could be improved in the process. Questions I ask include whether the parties believed I was impartial and whether they felt heard and respected. I seek to know what helped move them toward learning about themselves or the other party and what moved them toward resolution—or what created obstacles or impasse. And I often reflect on what I was feeling during the session, what but-

tons of mine were pushed, where I felt I was effective or, more frequently, where I felt I could have done better.

One of the most important elements that helps me be more confident in strategy development is grounding my practice in theory and research about psychological dynamics and group processes. From this body of knowledge we know a lot about what keeps people from accepting what would satisfy their needs; we understand the dynamics of distrust and how individuals and groups repair and rebuild breaches. Theory and research have been especially helpful in situations where a counterintuitive approach might be called for. When, for example, is it better to re-focus a party on himself instead of the other side? What to say in caucus, and what to say (or have them say) in front of the other side? My approach is increasingly guided by a better mix of instinct and learning-based strategies.

In almost every case I find myself incorporating social psychology into my practice. Awareness of my presence in a conflict draws me to research on social facilitation and mere presence, which suggests that people's performance may be affected simply by the presence of others, and a phenomenon like the Hawthorne effect, suggesting that groups' performances are enhanced when being observed but may revert later.¹ These studies prompt me to use my listening and acknowledgment of parties, my "presence," to better manage the mediation process. And when I sense there may be deference to the mediator's view, such as in the complex case where the parties sought my view, I test even more carefully to ensure that offers are genuine and potential agreements are durable. Furthermore, knowing that objective self-awareness research has found that people are more aware of how their behavior aligns with internal values when seeing themselves in a mirror or hearing their own voice guides me to use mirroring questions, reframing, and paraphrasing more intentionally.

Likewise, reactive devaluation research shows the power of the messenger over the message. This has guided me at times to use shuttle mediation to allow proposals to be better received than if delivered first by the other party. Attribution error studies, which highlight how people attribute their own behavior to external or environmental forces but attribute the behavior of others to character, personality, or internal traits, has also been a useful tool to help disputants reflect on judgments they may be making about others and help them better reflect on their own actions. And research on apologies and forgiveness helps craft genuine statements of remorse that authentically repair some of the perceived harm experienced by a grievant. This kind of grounding in theory has provided solid steps that allow me to more substantively and creatively find ways to enhance my mediation.

If a new mediator is like someone learning steps to a dance, the accomplished mediator is more like an Argentinian tango dancer. Argentine tango came to me later in life, after salsa and swing dance. Other than its obvious sensuality, it did not initially appeal to me. It seemed slow and a far cry from the overt energy and excitement of salsa or swing. But in 2015, I was finally persuaded by instructors and friends to give it a try and began to see another side of it.

It is the most intellectual dance I have discovered. In tango, you don't just walk up to someone and invite them to the floor, as you might in other social dances. Rather, you start with a *mirada*, a scan of potential partners from across the room. If your gazes meet and are held for a moment, then the invitation, or *cabeceo*, the slightest nod of the head, is initiated and responded to in kind. The leader then walks around the dance floor and approaches the partner, who does not stand until she is sure no signals have gotten crossed and the invitation was indeed intended

for her. The dancers are expected to dance three short songs with the same partner, a *tanda*, after which, during a short interlude, the leader returns the follower to her seat and the ritual begins again. If between any of the three songs in the *tanda* the leader or partner does not want to continue, he or she simply says, “thank you.” This can be a way to express that the dance is not working for one partner. These rituals involve subtlety and face-saving for both partners and can be easily missed by a casual observer.

During the dance itself, a leader in tango—like other social-partner dances—must navigate the floor to ensure their partner and others are not injured and must be a choreographer to initiate the partner’s moves. However, in tango, the leader must always be aware of what foot the partner’s weight is on relative to one’s own. You are leading the movement of four feet.

This can work beautifully when both partners are skilled and in synch with each other. However, there have been times when I was paired with a partner who was at a different level, or unable to maintain her own balance, or was an excellent dancer who just didn’t connect well with me. I recall one moment on a dance floor when my overly ambitious partner made a slight misstep that brought us crashing to the floor. I could have blamed her, but as the leader, I was responsible for navigating the floor, regardless of her skill level or how she responded to my lead.

The mediator is like that leader in Argentine tango. Essentially this means being fully and intuitively aware of what is going on with each of the other parties—down to the slightest, almost imperceptible, shift of weight. Mediation, as in tango, requires that deep sense of mastery of subject, artistry, and improvisation. It requires that degree of intuitiveness. A mediator must sense the situation, but, more important, must know how to seamlessly respond when the weight shifts occur, to guide the next

steps toward something that advances progress. It can be hard to perceive movement toward resolution from the outside, but these elements of mediation have served me well. However, unlike in tango, the mediator has the added complexity of being the leader of at least two partners—the disputants—at the same time. You are essentially balancing the weight and trying to coordinate the dance of six feet. In mediation, it seems, it takes three to tango.

Not long ago I mediated a conflict at an international school that involved parents on one side and school administration on the other. It was as intractable as any international political conflict I have mediated. After weeks of meetings with lots of anger and frustration, I brought representatives together for a joint session. With only 45 minutes left before the session began, I struggled as I reflected on what might nudge these disputants toward resolution when traditional attempts seemed to be failing. The attribution errors were plentiful on both sides, and I sensed that there was incongruity between their actions and their shared values. These two theories, minimally, were at play, and I needed to find a way to tap into their commonalities to thaw the ice and find a way to have them humanize the other side and hold a mirror to themselves so that they could ultimately communicate better. Then in a flash of inspiration, I realized it was Valentine's Day. I ran across the street, got some heart-shaped chocolates from a drugstore, and then laid out red construction paper, scissors, markers, and chocolates at the spots of each representative. When they arrived, the sides did not make eye contact with each other, and the mood was tense. After they were seated, I told them that because it was Valentine's Day, I would like them to cut out hearts from the red paper. Then I gave them questions I asked them to respond to on the hearts. The questions included why they worked at the jobs they did, what hopes they had for the children, what

environment they ultimately wanted in the school, and what ideal interaction they envisioned to work together. As each one shared, many were moved to tears, and they began to bond over their shared concern for the children and the school. School officials heard how much the parents had sacrificed for their children and how they cared to help make the school successful, and parents heard how the officials entered their profession because of their deep love of children and commitment to dedicate their life to improving education. It was a stretch to use this approach, but I felt confident of my underlying strategy (my reflective questions) and in using the creative approach (having them make hearts and articulate answers to the questions). It is also a technique that probably would not have worked well in many of the international cases I have been involved in. But it was the perfect improvisational catalyst for these disputants.

It bothers me that many mediators are not well prepared for complex mediations. Unfortunately, there is no advanced education required of mediators to ensure their continued and deeper learning or education in conflict resolution to sharpen and strengthen their practice. Most additional learning is self-selected, and many mediators simply assume that their previous roles—as judges, lawyers, or other professionals—will provide the necessary skills. While skills from prior jobs might sometimes be useful, many times mediators are caught off-guard by situations in which their professional training does not help them develop a deep understanding of the causes or provide clear guidance toward a particular strategy to fit a specific case.

I also believe that the best mediators learn the subjects of the cases they handle, even if that requires a deep-dive crash course in preparation. I recall cases where I had to

immerse myself in new subjects in science, employment law, intellectual property, or trademark patents.

One of the most memorable cases involved facilitating a global environmental agreement at a time when countries were at an impasse on how to phase out hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs). When first approached, around 2014, I recall feeling completely out of my element because I knew none of the technical details of this complex issue. HFCs are what make our air conditioners cold, but they also have some unfortunate environmental side effects that have prompted a global call to find alternatives. This dispute had many elements, from concerns about fairness and cost to developing countries that would be required to change their technology to the effectiveness of replacements, since the existing HFCs worked well in countries with high ambient temperatures. Between sessions I would try to immerse myself in information about the relevant science, technology, and a host of related issues. It was a dizzying experience during which I learned more than I ever wanted to about refrigeration and the environmental impact of how we cool our homes and workplaces. In 2016, after two years of work, while still swimming a bit out of my scientific depth, I was able to sit with environmental ministers from participating countries and probe with somewhat reasonably intelligent questions that reflected a basic understanding of their complex, and often technical, concerns. The ability to immerse myself deeply in new spheres of learning is one of mediation's great charms.

Mediation can sometimes appear deceptively simple to those who do not do this work. However, in my experience, the ability to find the thread that leads to resolution from a tangled web of conflict is not easy. When it works well, it can transform. And when it doesn't, it reminds me that I still have much to learn.

Nevertheless, my practice continues to mature, and from each case I reflect on, I develop more options for the next. My early cases found me in reactive mode, driven by the parties and responding frantically to each change of direction. Over time, with the acquisition of experience and intentional study of the field, I was able to better ground my practice in research and theories. As my grounding deepened, I was able to see the possible spaces for more flexible approaches that provided the creativity to pivot and improvise in the most complex cases. I no longer focus on the basic steps to the dance. They are certainly still there and foundational. But now I can take joy in the artistry, improvisation, and creativity that I can incorporate into challenging mediations.

These days some of my greatest joy also comes in paying forward the example of my own mentors who guided me both professionally and academically. Their openness to seeing and nurturing talent in their students or employees is a lesson I have not forgotten. I have tried to continue that legacy with students, interns, and staff who have worked with me over the years. Their successes, and there are many, are ones I celebrate and take pride in. They inspire me to continue to take on interesting and challenging work—and to partner with them as I do so.

Beyond the challenge, I also find the work to be deeply satisfying and meaningful. It is work that at its best guides disputants to resolve conflict, rebuild relationships, learn new skills, and reflect on themselves. And it is work that has allowed me to step into breaches and brawls and help restore a measure of mindfulness and peace to moments of chaos. I have learned much about people but, more important, as I have reflected on my own role as a mediator, I have learned more about myself. If you ask those who know me best, you would probably hear that I am a bit more patient, a better listener, less judgmental, and more forgiving than

I was earlier in life. The professional lessons of my craft have influenced who I am and how I move in the world. And it is through this work that some of my deepest and most meaningful moments of personal growth continue.

So the profession I ended up choosing because it embodied my values has not only found some small ways to make the world a little better for my children but has made me a bit better for the world. I often tell my daughters that any path they choose in life is fine with me, as long as they try to remember three things: do something you love, treat others with respect and dignity, and leave the world a little better than you found it. In mediation, I have been blessed to have found such a calling.

Notes

¹ The phrase “Hawthorne effect” has its origin in studies conducted in the 1920s and 1930s at the Hawthorne Works, a Western Electric factory outside Chicago. The Hawthorne Works had commissioned a study to see whether workers would be more productive in higher or lower levels of light. The workers’ productivity seemed to improve when changes were made but slumped when the study was over. Subsequent analysis by Henry A. Landsberger suggested that the productivity increase happened as a result of the motivational effect on the workers due to the interest being shown in them by the presence of the researchers.

References

- Chasin R., M. Herzig, S. Roth, L. Chasin, C. Becker, and R. Stains, Jr. 1996. “From Diatribe to Dialogue on Divisive Public Issues: Approaches Drawn from Family Therapy.” *Mediation Quarterly* 13(4): 323-344.