Mediation: The Best and Worst of Times

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MEDIATION: THE BEST AND
WORST OF TIMES

Jacqueline Nolan-Haley*

At this period in the evolution of dispute resolution, mediation is in a unique time zone, similar to what Dickens described in a *Tale of Two Cities*, as the best and worst of times, the seasons of Light and Darkness. It is the best of times, the season of Light and a time of joy in honoring human connections, as mediation is widely embraced in the public and private sectors. From government agencies and courts to corporations and United Nations peacemaking units, mediation offers a vision of hope in the midst of drowning bureaucracies, clogged dockets, corporate scandals and ethnic conflicts. But it is also the worst of times, the season of Darkness and sadness, as mediation escapes to her slumber and hibernates, surrounded by problems that need to be resolved, and could potentially be resolved, if only she were responsive.¹

Responding to one of the questions raised in this Symposium—is mediation sleeping—I take the optimistic view that mediation is not sleeping but simply resting, exhausted from the multiple demands placed on her. I make a modest claim that we can reasonably hope she will arise from her rest, radiate light, and offer the potential for healing² when the value of consent is once again acknowledged and respected. In short, we need a renewed appreciation of consent in mediation.³

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¹ Consider the creative possibilities of resolving conflicts around issues related to ebola, immigration and environmental disasters.


At one level, mediation is at the height of popularity, in some cases displacing arbitration as a method of dispute resolution. Frustrated by the delays and costs associated with contemporary arbitration practice, parties are turning to mediation to resolve and manage their disputes. “Obsession with mediation,” claims one scholar, is a “global phenomenon.” International and domestic provider organizations that formerly were focused on arbitration have enacted new rules that concentrate exclusively on mediation. Support for mediation is ubiquitous. From Africa to Malaysia the mediation project is gaining traction; in India, court-annexed mediation programs have been described as a “ray of hope.”

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5 See e.g., Alexander McKinnon, Mediation in England & Wales, Hong Kong and Singapore: Arbitration’s Reactions to Developments in Litigation, 8 WORLD ARB. & MED. REV. 369 (2014).


last ten years, the United Nations has offered greater encouragement to strengthen the role of mediation in resolving disputes and preventing conflict,11 and has issued Guidelines for effective mediation.12 The World Bank maintains an office of mediation services as part of its conflict resolution program.13 Scholars have suggested that mediation could be useful as a parallel practice to arbitration in investor-state disputes14 and the International Bar Association (“IBA”) has issued rules to govern such mediations.15 Currently, an UNCITRAL working group is considering a proposal from the United States for a convention on the recognition and enforcement of international settlement agreements resulting from mediation.16

In the United States, mediation is the most frequently used ADR process in state and federal courts. Judicial support for mediation, whether rooted in efficiency reasons17 or possibly exhaustion with adversarial procedures, has been a major factor in its growth.18 Corporations have also embraced mediation. A recent survey of Fortune 1000 companies showed that more companies reported using mediation for nearly all kinds of disputes while

11 See Report of the Secretary-General on Enhancing Mediation and Its Support Activities, S/2009/189 (Apr. 8, 2009) (describing the need for experienced mediators and support teams with women adequately represented, who have sufficient resources to intervene at early stages of conflict and attempt to address the root causes of conflict, overcome impediments to progress and obtain agreements that result in sustainable peace.) [hereinafter Report of the Secretary-General].


15 See IBA Rules, supra note 7.


18 Genn, supra note 6, at 13.
fewer companies reported arbitrating in key categories.\textsuperscript{19} Finally, mediation has proved effective in the resolution of disputes arising from disaster claims\textsuperscript{20} and a range of environmental issues.\textsuperscript{21}

II. \textbf{RESTING BETWEEN THE DARK AND THE DAYLIGHT}\textsuperscript{22}

Mediation’s Season of Light is fading. Some of my colleagues in this Symposium have eloquently described mediation’s descent from light to darkness.\textsuperscript{23} I will simply add to that list a few other storms threatening the landscape—assurances of confidentiality not honored,\textsuperscript{24} courts that look the other way when this happens,\textsuperscript{25} promises made in mediation and not kept,\textsuperscript{26} accusations of mediator coercion,\textsuperscript{27} participants acting in bad faith by using mediation as a fishing expedition, mediators failing to disclose conflicts of interest,\textsuperscript{28} and in some situations, giving inaccurate information to


\textsuperscript{20} American Arbitration Association, \textit{Storm Sandy}, https://www.adr.org/aaa/faces/aoe/gc/government/statenaturaldisasterprograms/sandy/sessionid=54vvJk3DQnT6zIkJ4pR0JHjJ340Si8K8OuMxTpszBTWqbbSBGL27?l=0521221?_afrLoop=257104801964186a&_afrWindowMode=0&_afrWindowId null%40%3Findnull%26afrWindowId%3Dnull%26afrLoop%3D257104801964186%26afrWindowMode%3D0%26_ad.ctrl-state%3Dbg8c3gn8_4 (describing the AAA Storm Sandy mediation program).


\textsuperscript{22} Sadly, this is not the pleasant time of day described in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s beloved poem \textit{The Children’s Hour}, available at http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/childrens-hour.


\textsuperscript{26} Coben & Thompson, supra note 24, at 73–89 (discussing cases challenging the enforceability of mediated agreements).

\textsuperscript{27} E.g., Vitakis-Valchine v. Valchine, 793 So. 2d 1094 (2001) (the case was remanded to the trial court).

\textsuperscript{28} CEATS, Inc. v. Continental Airlines, Inc., 755 F.3d 1356 (Fed. Cir. 2014) (petition for cert. pending).
parties. Also clouding the landscape are multiple permutations of mediation—other processes out there labeled mediation but in fact very different from the traditional understanding of mediation as a voluntary process based on party self-determination. Tacked on to this list are mediators who combine arbitration with mediation, those who offer proposals for settlement, and judges who mediate. Some countries use mediation and conciliation interchangeably, leading to confusion in cross-border mediation with parties who have different expectations of the process.

Numerous critics have described mediation’s shortcomings. Some have argued that unlike arbitration and litigation, mediation is unregulated and leaves mediation parties without protection. Others are concerned that mediation may become diluted as an increasing number of lawyers request that the joint session be eliminated. Some commentators claim that as mediation practice moves away from the fundamental principle of self-determination, its power to deal with issues of social justice has diminished. Finally, as mediation has expanded in the courts, it has generated

29 Rachael Field, Neutrality and Power: Myths and Reality (Nov. 2002), available at http://www.mediate.com/articles/fieldr.cfm (challenging mediators to be more honest in their claims of neutrality when mediating family disputes.).

30 Peter Adler, Protecting the Future of Mediation (Nov. 2014), available at http://www.mediate.com/articles/AdlerFuture.cfm (observing that “[M]ediation is a container into which people pour (and sometimes extract) collaborative law, citizen review panels, deliberative democracy, settlement hearings (in and out of court), collaborative governance, family conferencing, peer mediation, settlement weeks, joint fact-finding, and appreciative inquiry.”).


36 See, e.g., Eric Galton & Tracy Allen, Don’t Torch the Joint Session, 21 Disp. Resol. Mag. 25 (2014). It should be noted, however, that the feasibility of joint sessions depends upon context. UN mediators, for example, favor shuttle diplomacy over joint sessions that may give parties the opportunity to become more entrenched in their positions. See Report of the Secretary-General, supra note 9.

of self-determination is compromised, mediation loses its uniqueness as an instrument for both civility and justice.”).


39 Genn, supra note 35, at 411.


41 Hazel Genn writes that in England, “despite the promotion of mediation and the pressure exerted by the judiciary, there has been a relatively weak “bottom-up” demand even for very low-cost, court-linked mediation schemes.” Genn, supra note 35, at 404. Giuseppe De Palo and Mary Trevor report that according to statistics from the Centre for Effective Dispute Resolution in London, despite the fact that 90% of commercial mediations settle, only 8000 commercial and civil cases are mediated annually. Giuseppe De Palo and Mary B. Trevor, Is Mediation Moving Out of the Shadows And Into the U.K. Practice Mainstream?, 30 ALTERNATIVES 173 (2012).


44 Id.

45 Id. at 199.
IV. RETURN TO CONSENT

We should not separate consent from mediation.\(^{46}\) I propose a return to a consensual understanding of mediation, so that we may recover at least plausible account mediation’s joy, and its powerful connections to human dignity. Hopefully, this will attract potential users to engage with her once again. Mediation is a voluntary process based on party self-determination.\(^{47}\) Acknowledgement of this first principle honors the consensual nature of mediation both at entry into the process, during the process and at the outcome.\(^{48}\)

Pushback from potential users is often the result of unwanted pressure. Some parties’ discomfort with mediation comes from being pressured into participation.\(^{49}\) Coercion appears in many disguises—from telling parties that mediation is an automatic part of the litigation process to imposing costs and fees if they refuse to mediate. Non-consensual mediation may help to clear dockets, but it is a poor substitute for the real thing. It compromises a party’s ability to influence how her dispute is resolved,\(^{50}\) and may minimize the potential for meaningful settlement. There is some research which shows that cases are more likely to settle at mediation if the parties enter into the process voluntarily rather than being pressured into the process.\(^{51}\)

A. Court Mediation

Court-connected programs have been a breeding ground for non-consensual mediation practices with variations of mandatory

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\(^{49}\) Not all parties share this view, however. In an IMI survey of in-house counsel and senior managers in North America and Europe, nearly half the respondents stated that mediation should be a mandatory step in both arbitration and litigation. IMI International Corporate Users ADR Survey, INT’L MEDIATION INST. (Apr. 4, 2014), available at http://imimediation.org/imi-international-corporate-users-adr-survey-summary.

\(^{50}\) See Donna Shestowsky, Disputants’ Preferences for Court-Connected Dispute Resolution Procedures: Why We Should Care and We Know So Little, 23 OHIO ST. J. ON DISP. RESOL. 549, 550 (2008).

\(^{51}\) Genn, supra note 35, at 406.
regimes operating in many countries. In the United States, for example, courts have upheld programs where parties may be required to participate in mediation while England has adopted a more indirect approach through the imposition of costs. In the seminal case of *Halsey v. Milton Keynes General NHS Trust*, Lord John Dyson considered the question of whether courts could compel unwilling parties to mediate and he concluded that while courts could not force unwilling parties to mediate, they could use robust means to encourage mediation. Thus, parties who unreasonably refused to mediate could be liable for costs. *Halsey* generated much debate over the merits of compulsory mediation with courts extending its principle to refusals to negotiate, delays in agreeing to mediate, and taking unreasonable positions in mediation. Ten years after the *Halsey* decision, Lord Dyson reflected on the normative question of whether courts could order parties to mediate. His response is instructive on the issue of consent:

> [T]he real question is not whether or not a power exists to order mediation. Rather it is whether the court should exercise that power. Ten years on, I remain in the “carrot” camp; it is one thing to compel parties to consider mediation; it is another to frog march them to the mediation table and deny them access to the courtroom if they refuse to participate in the mediation.

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56 The *Halsey* court offered a non-exhaustive list of six factors in determining the reasonableness of a party’s refusal to participate in mediation: (1) the nature of the dispute; (2) the merits of the case; (3) the extent to which other sentiment methods have been attempted; (4) whether the costs of the ADR would be disproportionately high; (5) whether any delay in setting up and attending the ADR would have been prejudicial; and (6) whether the ADR had a reasonable prospect of success. *Id*.


58 Lord Dyson, Belfast Mediation Conference: *Halsey 10 Years On-The Decision Revisited* 11 (May 9 2014) (on file with the author).
B. International Mediation

Forced mediation has the trappings of arrogance, one of the seven deadly sins of mediation described by UN diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi.\footnote{LAKHDAR BRAHIMI & SALMAN AHMED, CTR. ON INT’L COOP., IN PURSUIT OF SUSTAINABLE PEACE: THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS OF MEDIATION (2008).} In the context of resolving international conflicts, meaningful mediation requires consent,\footnote{See JACOB BERCOVITCH, THEORY AND PRACTICE OF INTERNATIONAL MEDIATION 29 (2011) (claiming that “effective mediation requires consent, high motivation and active participation.”).} and lack of voluntariness in mediation has been considered morally problematic.\footnote{See Lea Brilmayer, Daniel J. Meador Lecture: America: The World’s Mediator, 51 ALA. L. REV. 715, 717 (1999). With reference to the role of the United States as mediator in international conflicts, Brilmayer writes “What seems to be a mutual acceptance of the process and outcome of mediation is frequently coerced, to a greater or lesser degree.” Id.} Consent is an integral aspect of mediator ethics codes,\footnote{See, e.g., IMI CODE OF PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT, INT’L MEDIATION INST., R. 3.2, https://imimEDIATION.org/imi-code-of-professional-conduct (“Fairness and integrity of the Process. Mediator will explain the mediation process to the parties and their advisers and be satisfied that they consent to the process being used and to the Mediator selected.”) (last visited Mar. 23, 2015).} rules,\footnote{See, e.g., IBA RULES, supra note 7, at art. 8(2) (“The mediator shall assist the parties to reach an agreement on a settlement of their dispute on a voluntary basis in which the parties make free, informed and self-determined choices as to the process and the outcome, . . .”).} and policy documents. The UN Guidance for Effective Mediation, for example, identifies consent as a crucial ingredient, noting that “[t]he success or failure of a mediation process ultimately depends on whether the conflict parties accept mediation and are committed to reaching an agreement.”\footnote{UNITED NATIONS GUIDANCE, supra note 12, at 23. It defines mediation as a “voluntary endeavor in which the consent of the parties is critical for a viable process and a durable outcome.” Id.} Certainly, where usage is low, we need to find new ways to motivate parties to use mediation.\footnote{A study from the Netherlands shows that mediation is not a one size fits all process and that success depends upon whether there is an appropriate analysis of the type of conflict. Genn, supra note 35, at 10 (citing MACHTIELF PEL, THE HAGUE, REFERRAL TO MEDIATION: A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR AN EFFECTIVE MEDIATION PROPOSAL, pt. 1 (2008)).} But, at the same time, we need to understand that there may be cultural reasons why mediation will not be a good fit in some cases.\footnote{E.g., In Ghana, parties reject what they consider the “compromise values” of mediation, particularly when it comes to highly valued assets such as land. Nolan-Haley, Mediation and Access to Justice in Ghana, supra note 8.}
V. Conclusion

Once consent is restored, it may be possible to recover an account of the joy of mediation. This is an intentional task that will require imagination, memory and reflection. We need to remember:

(1) what Lon Fuller told us about mediation’s capacity to realign relationships;\(^67\)

(2) that mediation offers relief from a somewhat rigid, rules-bound justice system just as equity offered relief from the common law;\(^68\)

(3) that mediation as a process has some powerful capacities—to acknowledge emotions and to respect the psychological and spiritual needs of the parties, including the need to reconcile, to forgive and to be forgiven; and finally

(4) that mediation provides opportunities to honor human dignity.

We all know stories about the joy that mediation can bring to parties. Consider the accounts that many of our colleagues in this Symposium have written about the powerful stories that mediators tell,\(^69\) the transformative effects of empowerment and recognition,\(^70\) and the procedural justice benefits that accompany mediation.\(^71\) For many of us, it was a certain joy that brought us to mediation in the first place. If we can recover a renewed account of that joy, I believe that mediation will arise from her slumber and parties will be motivated to engage in the process. This will not happen while the value of consent remains an imaginary part of the mediation process. A new dawn will rise when consent in mediation is for real.

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