Searching the Soul of Our Movement

Wayne D. Brazil

Berkeley Law

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Do we really understand what motivates us? What is the soul of our movement? Does our movement have an essential center, certain irreducible “value elements”? Is the soul of our movement lodged in process integrity and party self-determination, independent of any “substantive” values? Or, when we look harder at ourselves, do we find that, as important as “means” are to us, we also are animated, fundamentally, by the pursuit of certain “ends”?

Do we fail to dig deeply enough when we purport to answer this question, as I have been wont to do, simply by insisting that the means are the end, the only end?

To begin getting leverage on these questions, we might ask ourselves how we really feel about people who use unassailable means to further concentrate wealth in the hands of the few, to further remove resources and opportunities from the poor, or to capitalize on other people’s circumstantial vulnerabilities.

While thinking about these issues, I began to wonder if my attachments to process integrity and party self-determination are rooted in substantive values or goals to which I am even more deeply committed. Two principal candidates emerged when I examined myself and the vocabulary through which I sermonize: peace and connection.

Am I “in ADR” because, for a very long time and at a very fundamental level, I am alienated and frightened by fighting? Is my attachment to ADR rooted in a fundamental discomfort with Charles Darwin—an elemental aversion not only to overt conflict, but also to some kinds of competition, to there being winners and losers, especially to there being losers?

To explore these matters further, I began thinking about the emotions I feel after I have completed settlement conferences. I feel self-respect when I have maintained integrity in the processes I host, but I feel joy when those processes produce settlements. And while I feel pride when I honor ethical mandates, I feel fulfilled when the cases settle.

I began to wonder: do these emotions signal that what I value most might not be process integrity, but peace? That what really animates me is a goal, an end, and that that end is the removal of conflict?

Or, for me, might peace be only a penultimate end? Do I pursue peace because I sense that it is a necessary precondition for something even more elementally important to me: connection?

I am fond of saying that the most important thing in life is how people treat one another. At one level, when I say this I just want people to be courteous. But at another level, I want people to interact with an open and active respect for one another. This apparently primal wish probably has several partially overlapping sources: a fear of violence, a need to feel protected from the bigger guys, a deep emotional commitment to the notion of equal rights under the law (a substantive norm), and, maybe most fundamentally, an intuitive sense that when we approach others with an open and active respect, we invite them to connect with us.

Giving real respect is not only an invitation to connect. It also is, in itself, both a form and an act of connection.

Wayne D. Brazil is on the faculty at Berkeley Law. Before that, he was a United States Magistrate Judge in the Northern District of California for 25 years. He is a member of the Dispute Resolution Magazine editorial board. He can be reached at wdbrazil@law.berkeley.edu.
Connection is a substantive value. Connection can make us feel whole, complete, rooted, safer, and that it is OK that we are here, that there is nothing fundamentally wrong or even suspicious about the fact that we exist. We may sense, at our deepest instinctive levels, that being part of a group is essential to survival. And when we feel connected, we feel that others affirm us, that they endorse and thus legitimize our existence.

Why am I pursuing these thoughts? What does it matter if my deepest value drivers are peace and connection? Is there any necessary tension between being committed to process integrity and party self-determination, on the one hand, and, on the other, being committed to peace and connection?

Have we circled back to the question, in a modified form, of whether there is any necessary tension between rights and resolution in our work as mediators?

If we are working in a situation where such tension exists, we risk harm to the process and to ourselves if we don’t recognize it and if we don’t have a clear understanding of priorities among our own motives and values. If we have substantive goals, in fact, but we don’t acknowledge that we do, or we don’t fully understand what they are, those semisubterranean goals might affect how we perform our roles, how we feel about our work, and how we assess its success. We must try not to permit ourselves to be demoralized by forces we don’t understand or by unknowingly casting the net of our sense of personal responsibility wider than our poor powers to add or detract can reach.

So, we would be well advised to try to identify, in advance, some of the circumstances in which, to be true to the self that is most central to us, we will need to elevate one set of our values over another.

For most of us, most of the time, I suspect that we will feel most centered when we elevate the values of process integrity and party self-determination above our attachments to other values that are important to us. But there may be times when we can achieve that elevation only with great effort and at great personal cost.

Perhaps it will be in these crucible moments, when we engage in an inner struggle of this character, when we experience the fact that the struggle that tears most at our hearts is between competing sets of our own comparably beautiful values, that we will come closest to the soul of our movement.