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President's Column:

"Being Peace"

By David A. Hoffman

A few months ago my son gave me a book entitled *Being Peace*, by Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk and poet who teaches a form of mindfulness that we mediators might find useful. The core teaching of the book is that developing peacefulness and inner harmony in our lives has enormous impact on those around us and is a necessary precursor to peace and social justice on a larger scale in our world. For people involved in dispute resolution, the concept is evocative, suggesting a way in which we, as mediators, can contribute to the process of reconciliation by bringing peace with us into the room.

How do we do that -- how can we bring peace into the room? I don't think there is any one answer. Each of us has a peaceful place in our hearts, and we each have our own ways of finding it. For some, meditation is the road; for others, it's religion; for some it's mediation itself. One very experienced mediator I know spends a few moments before going into the mediation room reciting the St. Francis prayer ("Lord, make me be an instrument of Your peace . . .").

However we reach that peaceful place, what is clear to me is that finding it, and accessing it when we are working with others, can profoundly influence our ability to help people resolve their disputes. As Thich Nhat Hanh writes, "if we are peaceful, . . . everyone in our family, our entire society, will benefit from our peace."

It is hardly surprising to think that the personal qualities of the mediator affect the mediation process. A similar insight comes from the social sciences, in a phenomenon known as the "Hawthorne effect" -- a term used to describe the changes people make in their behavior when they realize they are being observed. The recognition of this phenomenon came from an experiment conducted in the early 1900s at Western Electric's Hawthorne plant on the outskirts of Chicago. The researchers wanted to know whether increasing the illumination of the factory would increase the workers' productivity. After determining the benchmarks of worker performance, the researchers increased the illumination and found that productivity increased. In order to confirm these results, they then reduced the level of illumination below its original level, and found to their surprise that productivity was higher than the benchmark levels. They

concluded that it was their presence -- not the illumination levels -- that had caused the change in worker productivity. (This insight parallels physicist Werner Heisenberg's discovery in the 1920s of the "uncertainty principle" -- i.e., that the observation of sub-atomic particles influences their behavior.)

The subtlety of the influences we have on each other continually amazes me. As Albie Davis noted in an article several years ago, women have long known that, when they live together (e.g., in a commune or sorority house), their menstrual periods tend to synchronize. How does this occur? A controlled study performed at the University of Chicago, and published this past year in the scientific journal Nature, showed that pheromones -- scents that the human body emits but which escape conscious detection -- influence the timing of menstrual cycles, leading to what is known as "menstrual synchrony." (See N. Angier, "Study Finds Signs of Elusive Pheromones in Humans," *New York Times*, March 12, 1998.)

I do not understand the details of all of this research, but what it does confirm for me is the extent to which we influence each other in ways that defy conscious regulation. Psychologists who developed the techniques of neuro-linguistic programming have suggested that we can create higher levels of rapport with people by matching their body language or breathing patterns and using language in ways that match their own frames of reference (auditory, visual, or tactile). However, I am coming to the conclusion that much of what we communicate to each other is far beyond our ability to structure or control. In short, we cannot pretend to bring peace into the room if it is not in our hearts.

What this means for mediators, in my opinion, is that once we have learned the basic principles and skills of mediation, and practiced them to the point where they feel natural, the next frontier of learning and development is inside ourselves. One way to describe that frontier is the quest for personal integration -- a trait that clinical psychologists call "congruence," a quality of inner and outer harmony in which the various parts of our persona are in synch with each other. Psychologists have recognized that they can be more effective as clinicians if they develop such integration or, to use another term from their research, "presence."

The term "presence" has a wonderful double meaning in this context because it suggests not only the high level of attentive awareness that mediators (and psychologists) try, despite our wandering thoughts, to bring to the parties (i.e., to be fully "present"), but also the influence, suggested by the Hawthorne effect, that we have on the parties simply by being who we are.

So, those fundamental questions that we wrestle with all of our lives - who are we? who are we looking to become? -- return to us as critical questions for our work as mediators, just as they are central to the other pursuits of our lives. William James said many years ago that our personalities set like plaster by the age of 30, but for those of us who are long past that milestone, I would like to suggest that our souls retain some plasticity, some ability to develop, that we never outgrow. This is the frontier that lies before us.

As the field of dispute resolution matures, the increasing number of articles on spirituality and mediation reflect an important direction in which our field is evolving. Sociologists of another era might look back on us and observe that this interest in spirituality was natural, given the advancing age of the mediators and our society's renewed interest in eastern religion. Whatever the explanation may be, however, I think it is fair to say that this is a direction that we not only bring to our work but which our work brings to us -- i.e., we should not ignore the impact of the mediation process on our own psychological and spiritual development. In most mediations we encounter parties whose disputes do not differ radically from conflicts that have arisen in our own lives -- i.e., their issues are our issues. In order to be effective in such a setting, we must address our own need for growth, in our relationships with our clients and in our lives outside the mediation. A truly successful resolution of a mediation thus can become, for the mediator, a metaphor for the personal challenges in his or her life and a means for achieving a higher level of personal integration.

Being peace is my resolution for the New Year, and a lifetime goal. I feel blessed that I work in a field which, in ways that are both subtle and obvious, nurtures that objective and allows me to share what little of it I have found with others.

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[The ideas expressed in this column grew out of a workshop that Daniel Bowling (then executive director of SPIDR) and I gave at the 1997 SPIDR conference in Orlando and are the subject of an article co-authored with Daniel, Bringing Peace into the Room.]