

EUROPEAN MEDIATION CONFERENCE, BELFAST

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ADDRESS BY BRENDAN McALLISTER

DIRECTOR OF MEDIATION NORTHERN IRELAND

“THE VOICE OF MEDIATION”

Lord Mayor, distinguished guests, brothers and sisters of the mediation movement,

I would love, some day, to sing a Van Morrison song, in front of a live band.

My daughter, Anna, now 25 and a professional performer, has given me some advice on this idea.

She has warned me not to try to mimic him. She says that you have to think about the song and develop your own interpretation, but without making the song unrecognisable.

Anna began dancing when she was about four years old. One year my wife roped me in to acting as compere at the dance school's annual show and, as it turned out, I undertook this task for a number of years. So, I got a chance to observe girls like my daughter growing as dancers year on year.

Each year the tiny tots would fill the stage for their big moment and I could see their struggle – having arrived full of the impulse to dance, the art was bouncing about in them but they had little technique and, therefore, no discipline in their performance.

Next year, the same little girls would reappear and display a grasp of ballet technique that seemed very mechanical. Like learner drivers, they were preoccupied with following instruction.

As the children grew a bit older and their numbers began to thin out, I could see in their performances a bit of personal flair and style emerging and blending with the directions of the choreographer.

By the time a dancer had matured to the senior levels, I could see that something vital in her performance was coming from within; the discipline had been internalised. Art and technique were merging to form the dancer's craft. Something had been learned from the outside and was expressed back outwards from something inside.

The poet Robert Graves once wrote to someone about their mutual friend and observed:

'She speaks in her own voice, even to strangers'. (taken from a speech by John Montague, when Poet in Residence at Queens University Belfast).

This morning, at this conference, we quite deliberately asked two young local singers to perform for you and each to finish with one of their own songs. Justin Grant chose a song entitled "*Can't stop messing with your heart*" and Eilidh Patterson chose "*I am still learning*".

While many of us like to sing in the bathroom, a professional singer has really found their own voice and has enough confidence and craft to use it to an audience of strangers.

I was reading an interview in the "Guardian" newspaper, the other day, with Diane Reeves, the jazz singer from Detroit. She has launched a new album entitled "When you know".

Let me read an extract from John L Walters' article:

' " What advice would you give to a young singer starting out?"

"First of all, I would tell them, maybe you don't know what you want to do, but know what you don't want to do."

"Your voice is not your instrument.

Your voice is the character that you build, your innermost feelings, the things that you want to say, and your instrument is the vehicle that you use to carry the message.

After you start to connect these things, you have to define it, refine it, respect it and protect it.

Nowadays the music industry tell you what to do, and who to sound like."

So is there a moral purpose to getting music right?

"I think so. Art and culture and all of these things – they really matter.

They shape your individuality." '

I would suggest to you that art matters in mediation.

My understanding of 'art' is that it is something which reveals that which was hidden.

And the origin of art is 'creativity'.

But, what is the source of creativity?

I would contend that the source of creativity is 'spirituality'.

And what, then, is spirituality?

It seems to me that spirituality is a sense that there is more. And spirituality is a conscious engagement with the source of your creativity; it is interaction with the 'more'.

For those who believe in God, this means a conscious engagement with the mystery that is the Creator, God.

For atheists, it means an engagement with the centre of yourself; it is visitation at the well from which your creativity springs.

The work of mediation is the craft by which we mediators enable people suffering conflict to access their creativity and help them find their own voice.

This is why mediation is a spiritual experience.

Some of you will know that I am fond of re-telling what I'd call the Benedictine's Challenge.

It happened one night a few years ago. The Dalai Lama was coming to Belfast to participate in a conference run by the World Community for Christian Meditation (WCCM). An Advance Team, led by the WCCM's leader, the Benedictine priest, Laurence Freeman, came to see me to discuss their plans. They told me they were thinking of a theme of 'Dialogue for Peace'.

I said, 'Oh, no, please, don't. Dialogue has become a word beloved of nationalists and tends to belong to them right now. As for 'peace'? Well, that word is just exhausted here.'

Then Laurence Freeman observed: 'I can see you are a person for whom words are very important.'

'Words are all I have!' I instantly retorted.

'No they're not.' the Benedictine replied.

And in that moment, it came back to me like a vivid dream but it was a real memory:

I was in the Maze prison with my colleague, Joe Campbell, in early January, 1998, a couple of weeks after the murder, in the prison, of the loyalist paramilitary leader, Billy Wright, whom we had known.

In the weeks after his death, loyalist sympathisers went on a revenge killing spree, killing about 12 people. The victims were simply Catholics, targeted because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. We sat in a cell with two of Wright's lieutenants, both of them still shaken by the assassination of their leader in their very midst. The tea-time news was on a small T.V. in the cell. A taxi driver had been shot by Wright sympathisers the previous night. A small boy, aged about 10 years old, stood in front of the camera and said:

'I'd just like to ask the men who did this: "why did you shoot my Daddy?"

Instinctively, neither my colleague nor myself said anything. It seemed that no words were necessary; that our very presence in the intimate surroundings of the prison cell was enough to express some kind of accountability for such senseless killing.

The news bulletin ended. One of our hosts switched the T.V. off and we commenced our meeting, without a word about the grieving boy, though the cell was full of him.

For a few moments, the child's voice had created a loud silence between us.

A few years later, on my last visit to the Maze,, shortly before its closure, I sat with one of those prisoners, now close to release, and recalled the incident of the questioning child. The prisoner had become a friend and we could talk more candidly now.

He said, yes, he remembered that time. Yes, he remembered it well. I said that it had seemed to me that it was best to say nothing, even unnecessary; that simply being there, amidst their embarrassment, was enough.

The prisoner agreed and confirmed that, indeed, our presence had caused embarrassment. He remembered it well.

Back in my office with Laurence Freeman's challenge, I knew that as a mediator, I also had 'silence', not just words; that sometimes it is simply enough to be there, while people wrestle with their conflict.

A few days later, Laurence sent me a note, wishing me well with my work, but adding:

"Remember, that while your words are important, don't forget to look after the spaces between them."

I think there is a difference between being 'self-centred' and being 'selfish'.

As practitioners of peace, we must try to have inner equilibrium; be centred within ourselves. In a sense, we must be 'self-centred' and 'other-focused'.

In order to give deep attention to others, we must try to have balance within ourselves.

Then, with our careful words, with each of our careful words, formed within our own spirit, we find our own voice as a mediator; a sparing voice, not over-worded; a confident voice that is also gentle.

And in between our words, we must try to listen well.

In order to care for the mediator's voice, we must each find our own ways of keeping the spiritual discipline of renewing the well within us; of visiting that well – God or 'Centre' - which is the source of our creativity as mediator artisans.

Mediation practice that is based upon such interiority becomes a better craft.

Mediation is the craft of helping people to speak in their own voice, especially to strangers.

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