**I’M NOT NEUTRAL ABOUT NEUTRALITY:**

**I’M PARTIAL TO MULTI-PARTIALITY**

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Embarking upon the journey of becoming a mediator, 25 years ago, led me into learning a new language, one that would be spoken both internally – (in how I would think about the mediation participants and their circumstances) - and externally – (in how I would interact with them). Since I realized that the way I mediate is determined by what I am thinking, I was motivated to become very cognizant of my thoughts, so that I wouldn’t be driven by any unconscious biases.

Instead, I wanted to develop my sense of shared humanity, so that I would observe, and interact with, everyone equitably. By learning how to encourage and accommodate each participant’s individuality, without inserting my own judgment, or expectations, I hoped to skillfully connect with everyone in the mediation and fairly support them all through the process of resolving their conflict.

As I began developing this approach of being allied with everyone, I wanted a way to explain it to the participants, during the opening statements of the mediation, so they would know what to expect. I was originally instructed to describe myself as “neutral” in an attempt to assure the participants that I wouldn’t be taking sides.

While I wanted to dutifully follow this instruction, being new to the field and eager to do everything right, I soon became uncomfortable with the word and the concept of being neutral. I understood the importance of not being one-sided, and yet, I wanted a better word for more accurately describing my method of siding with everyone rather than no one. “Neutral” felt unnatural because it seemed rather lifeless and inactive, as if the mediator is not really present for, or sincere about, the process.

To me, neutral sounds like a car idling, stopped at a red light. My mediation is a go, moving forward with a green light. I snap into gear, actively engaged, riding directly alongside the participants, and not hanging back passively in the gearless-ness of neutral.

When I looked up synonyms for neutral in the thesaurus, I found:

“Disinterested, uncommitted, uninvolved, inactive, indifferent, detached, unconcerned and nonchalant.” These words are actually antonyms for my active and involved approach to mediation and the overall essence of the process.

And, when I looked up “neutral” in the dictionary, these definitions seemed equally antithetical to the spirit of mediation.

Definition #1 of Neutral:   
“Not helping or supporting either side in a conflict”

I wondered, if I’m not helping or supporting either side, then what am I doing as a mediator? I actually want to support every side, and to have participants count on me to do so.

Definition #2 of Neutral:   
“Having no strongly marked or positive characteristics or features”

On the contrary, I want to have plenty of positive characteristics, such as being trustworthy, kind, knowledgeable about the process, open-minded, fair, and many other strongly marked features that assure the participants that they are in skillful and caring hands.

Definition #3 of Neutral:   
“A disengaged position of gears in which the engine is disconnected from the driven parts”

I like this imagery. If we imagine that the “driven parts” are the participants, and the mediator is in a “disengaged position of gears,” then there is no “engine” running the process because the mediator is “disconnected.” This is exactly how the word “neutral” feels to me – disconnected and disengaged.

My research about the word neutral diminished my neutrality about it, and I came to realize I would not be using it to explain my role as a mediator. So, I still needed a word to describe this aspect of what I am and how I work.

Impartial? No, that felt even further off the mark than neutral. Impartial seems to imply that I don’t really care and I’m not invested in the people, process or outcome.

So, I kept searching for a different word to use, one that would actually capture the essence of my equal engagement, fairness and consideration for all parties. And when it happened, that I found the word, and the wonderful concept of, “multi-partiality,” I knew I had, at long last, found my vernacular soul mate.

The concept of multi-partiality accurately expresses my equal alliance with, respect for and care about everyone in the mediation, and characterizes my dedication to the mutually collaborative nature of the process. It also frees me from describing myself as neutral, and instead, being someone who is fully engaged, with every gear I’ve got - my mind, heart, spirit, energy, knowledge and skills….and my humanity, which connects me to the humanness in all people.

As a multi-partial mediator, I create a space where people can participate equitably in the entire process. They can share their experiences, be heard and understood, and work together to discover and agree upon solutions that will create a solid framework for moving forward. To support this process, I use a variety of mediation skills, such as asking open questions that encourage true expression to emit and emote from everyone present. I allow equal time for each participant to answer and to speak their truth, creating an exciting space for new information and insights to emerge, and a safe place for differences to co-exist together.

I listen with equal attention and authentic interest to all parties, encouraging them to share their perspective of the situation, what led them to see it in that way, and where they want to go with it. By creating this spaciousness for everyone to talk and listen, stress can go down, mutual understanding can grow, and initial perspectives and desires, that once seemed immovable, can even change. With the tension being released, the participants can expand their bandwidth to shift from any antagonism and miscommunication they may have had, to understanding, acceptance, empathy and collaboration. By being a part of this effective and positive process, the participants can expand their tolerance and compassion for each other, thereby tapping into their own experience of multi-partiality.

I find a vast difference between the concepts of impartial and multi-partial. Whereas impartial feels like I may not even notice the personalities of the participants, multi-partial is about honoring and bringing out each individual personality. And, while being impartial means that I won’t favor anyone, multi-partial means that I favor everyone equally. Impartial sounds like I don’t have my heart in it, while multi-partial means that I’m super invested in providing the best possible process that I can. And this process can lead to win-win outcomes for all, which is also a concept fully aligned with multi-partiality….I keep working equally with everyone until everyone is an equal winner.

If I drift away from multi-partiality, and tell people what to do, or begin to take sides, I am putting myself in the role of the judge, and then the process becomes more about me, as an authority figure, rather than about the participants, as the experts in their own lives. If I take it upon myself to decide who is right and who is wrong, it would display a lack of trust in the participants to work it out together. On the other hand, by being multi-partial, I am assuring them of my confidence in their ability to have a successful mediation and outcome. Multi-partial means that I trust and validate each of their realities and truths, even if they differ from mine or from each other’s.

If I favor one party over the other, I can exacerbate the conflict, and they will be left without the anchor of fairness holding the process together. This would then deny the participants of the experience of a collaborative and transformative mediation process, and perhaps leave them with a distorted notion about what mediation really is. The essence of mediation is only maintained when the process is driven by, and belongs to, the people, who are fully welcomed, exactly as they are, by a truly multi-partial mediator who supports everyone equally.

Many people are accustomed to not being valued in this way, to not having a voice in their own circumstances, and instead, allowing, or getting pressured into having, authority figures making decisions for them. A mediator can experience the great joy of breaking that mold in which people are disempowered, and instead, view everyone as having equal value to each other and to oneself. Multi-partiality is all about letting people know that their voice matters, that their concerns are listened to and taken into account, and that their ideas for making change are worthwhile contributions that will be applied towards finding mutual solutions.

My choice to be multi-partial doesn’t mean that I don’t have feelings or that I won’t possibly be pulled in different directions during the mediation process. I have cried and laughed while mediating. I am human and my emotions have a wide range. The goal is to not get sidetracked by my own ideas, emotions or biases, but to stay fully tuned in to the participants’ experiences. The way I do this is to remain very aware of my internal self. As soon as I notice that I’m becoming partial, I consciously acknowledge the presence of the thought.

Rather than getting down on myself for having biases, I actually enjoy the process of noticing them, because it allows me to learn more about myself, and to engage in the practice of putting those biases aside in order to mediate well. By making a conscious choice to not be influenced by my biases, it allows me to open myself more fully to the reality of each person, excited to discover who they are, what matters to them, and how I can support them fully, regardless of any initial judgment I may have had.

I welcome my internal awareness of my biases, because I want to know what’s driving my external words and actions, in order to stay clear and effective throughout the process. Once I am aware of the bias, I remind myself that this mediation isn’t about me, and that my biases are biased and not useful in this process. My goal then is to quickly let go of these biases and move smoothly back into acknowledging and valuing each person’s experience equally.

Another way that I put aside my biases is by reminding myself that, under different circumstances, I could be in anyone’s shoes, going through what they are going through. I also remember that I was born into a certain place, time and family that shaped much of who I am and determined what lens I look through to see the world. Other people have very different backgrounds and lenses to look through. As soon as I remember this, I can let go of my judgment and return to being multi-partial. In this way, I hope to exemplify and encourage mutual acceptance, despite our differences.

One of the amazing gifts of being a multi-partial mediator, is this chance to go beyond my own self, to have the opportunity to get a glimpse of seeing life thru someone else’s eyes. The variety of personalities that I encounter allows me to receive all types of people into my world and honor them for exactly who they are. My viewpoints get enriched beyond what I was already seeing. I cherish this broadening of my horizons, because each encounter expands my experience and my mind, and therefore, my ability to be multi-partial. By understanding and accepting people, as they are, I recognize that everyone has something to offer when given the context and safe space to do so.

Since the multi-partial mediator creates this welcoming environment in which people can openly express themselves, there can be moments during mediation when this expression becomes quite emotional and even confusing. This is sometimes a necessary part of the process, to get to, and then through, these difficult places, in order for transformation to occur. And, this can also be a precarious time, requiring skillful facilitation. As a multi-partial mediator, I allow for these turbulent moments while also remaining very attentive to the state of the participants. If the conversation is no longer constructive, I am ready to step in at any time to re-state, clarify or re-direct the interaction, in order to keep the process feeling respectful and supportive for everyone.

As a mediator, I have agreed to create this productive setting for the people who have chosen to participate in this process, whether the mediation is challenging or flowing smoothly. I sincerely apply myself to the process because I greatly admire people who are willing to show up for mediation and to engage in resolving their conflict, even without knowing how it will go. They are being vulnerable, and may initially feel like they are taking a risky leap into the unknown. They are trusting that I will create the right environment with them for everything to go well. So, each and all of them deserve to be valued with the highest regard by me, and to have their hopes, concerns, and goals equally considered throughout the entire session.

This philosophy, with the steps and communication skills applied to make it come alive, doesn’t only belong to the mediator. The participants can observe, and experience, what the mediator is doing, and then incorporate this same multi-partial approach into the way they interact with each other, both during and after the mediation. For example, by watching the mediator acknowledge and thank each person for sharing their views, the participants can witness the effectiveness of listening to each other with appreciation. By observing the mediator’s focus on the positive aspects of each person, the participants can learn about seeing the best in others. By seeing how smoothly a conversation can go, when the mediator gives each person plenty of time to speak, the participants can structure their future conversations to provide space for everyone to equally express themselves.

These are just some of the many techniques that the multi-partial mediator welcomes the participants to witness, experience and absorb during their mediation session, and carry forward into their future interactions, if they choose to. Whatever methods the mediator has learned and uses, are available for others to learn and use. Because of the common humanity amongst the mediator and the participants, everyone has access to developing and applying these same philosophies and techniques. And, indeed, the mediator continually learns from the participants, as well. This concept of sharing information and skills amongst equals, honors the agency and authority of each person, which exemplifies multi-partiality.

Multi-partial is not just a word to use instead of neutral. It’s actually an entirely different concept for approaching mediation. Having new vocabulary like this is a vital part of the ongoing expansion of the field of Conflict Resolution as it continues to grow. New ways to describe what we do, can lead to new ways of doing what we do. When I lost my neutrality about the word neutral, and became very partial to the word and concept of multi-partiality, my experience of being a mediator was greatly enriched. For me, this all-inclusive approach of being allied with every participant, brings out the wonderful possibilities inherent in resolving conflict, and also exemplifies the overall collaborative, transformative and vibrant spirit of mediation.