

BOOK REVIEWS:

Michelle LeBaron, Carrie MacLeod & Andrew Floyer Acland, Eds., *The Choreography of Resolution: Conflict, Movement, and Neuroscience* (ABA Section of Dispute Resolution 2014)

Kenneth Cloke, *The Dance of Opposites: Explorations in Mediation, Dialogue and Conflict Resolution Systems Design* (Goodmedia Press 2013)

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True confession: I have never had a formal dance lesson. So it was with some reluctance that I opened the new book published by the ABA's Section of Dispute Resolution, *The Choreography of Resolution*, which I had ordered weeks ago and then placed on my back credenza. It was only after I was invited to a book signing for *The Dance of Opposites*, at the home of author Ken Cloke, that I could successfully coax both volumes out onto the dance floor for a whirl.

A dancer himself, Cloke uses Dance as a metaphor for conflict resolution, while *The Choreography of Resolution* quite literally begs the reader/dancer to process the lessons within it kinesthetically, allowing movement itself to shape the ideas and realizations that flow from the experience.

As a reader, I was flummoxed by the clumsiness of words to communicate flow and silence. Indeed, editor Andrew Floyer Acland, one of the pioneers of ADR and stakeholder dialogue in the U.K. who has written and taught extensively on negotiation, mediation and conflict transformation, acknowledges that the purpose of the book is to underscore the stark contrast between our "first generation" word-heavy roles as mediators and the "second generation" call for more attention to be paid to the negative spaces that are ever present in conflict: those that lie between the rational brain and the creative imagination. Still, I couldn't quite process how I was meant to experience these messages while sitting on a sofa reading words describing a four-year project of dance and conflict resolution which took place at the European Graduate School in Saas-Fee, Switzerland, where editors Floyer Acland and Professors Michelle LeBaron and Carrie MacLeod from the University of British Columbia met up with internationally acclaimed modern dancer and choreographer, Margie Gillis, to explore and document the benefits of dance to conflict resolution as a field.

Cloke's book reminds the reader that most conflict arises out of distrust, whereas dance depends upon a great deal of trust. The choreography he describes includes offer and acceptance, creating new and different cycles of communication. This felt much more genuine and accessible to my own experience. And so I forged on with both *The Choreography* and *The Dance* to discover if I could find synthesis between the two.

Cloke's *Dance* speaks more directly to mediators to suggest that we are a part of a comprehensive global movement that is in fact transforming and reshaping the world in which we live. He offers tangible guides toward bringing forth this new vision, taking into account the larger social and environmental conflicts that impact all of us. He quotes Martha Graham, "We look at the dance to impart the sensation of living in an affirmation of life, to energize the spectator into keener awareness of the vigor, the mystery, the humor, the variety, and the wonder of life," as well as Jelaluddin Rumi, "Live at the empty heart of paradox. I'll dance there with you, cheek to cheek."

Eventually, *The Choreography* began to make sense to me. For example, when Floyer Acland uses the metaphor of the Japanese garden to describe how dance relates to

mediation I understood better that sometimes the empty spaces, the shapes, the relation between disparate elements can inform how people interact in a different dimension than the hard decision-making of Western Corporate thinking. In some sense, he describes the benefits of mediating within the shadows of what is not said and acknowledging the high cost of doing nothing.

Another analogy that I understood was mediation as poetry: teaching people to listen to one another and then to understand what they are hearing. *Choreography* opens up the possibility that mediators consciously look for the less than rational elements of the conflict before them, to see into the participants' hearts and souls, not just their minds.

Of course, there are many orchestrations which are commonly found in the language of dance within commercial mediation. Consider, for example, the typical "sidestepping of the issues," "stepping on the other's toes," and other corporeal terms like "making room," "taking a breather," "grasping at straws" and "stepping aside." The various authors and editors of *The Choreography* advocate embracing dance as a means to understand relational connection, synchronicity and ways to stay "in step."

As a student of International Relations in the 1970s, I appreciate the concept of how cultural and creative arts have the power to "recover muted histories from the past, restructure the present and re-imagine the future." Intellectually, I appreciated *The Choreography's* premises, yet I struggled to make applications that are useful for my own work in mediating litigated cases. Could I imagine a bunch of adversarial lawyers and their clients dancing through the hallways at ADR Services?

Although I still cannot imagine that, *The Choreography* did help illuminate my own practical observations as to the flow of energy between participants, the rhythm of when to intervene and when to let the participants dance, whether to prod them to energize one another (as Martha Graham described) or even dare them to dance cheek to cheek (as Rumi suggested). Acknowledging a choreographed dance challenged me to consider pacing and when words were inadequate and gestures – such as a touch or hug – would work better.

One interesting observation in *The Dance of Opposites* was the simple differentiation between "reacting" and "responding." Whereas reacting is finite and typically places both blame and judgment on the other, responding means taking responsibility for your own role. Responding is an invitation to explore further, and a mark of emotional maturity.

In the end, the two books, read together, have persuaded me that mediators need to be artists as much as they need to be lawyers, psychologists and management consultants. It is the job of artists to discern hidden possibilities, cultivate new tones and tempos, explore nuances of shade or meaning and bring to life what may be inherent in an object or in conflict, but hidden away for only an artist to discover and gently bring to light.

The metaphor of dance helped me to make the connection that is critical to bridge the gap between reason and the point in conflict when reason is not enough. As Cloke writes, "Our youthful field is bursting with creative insights and immense promise." He offers the prospect of a "conflict revolution," by which he means a comprehensive, fundamental transformation in the way we argue, disagree and resolve differences.

Who knows, there might be a place for me on "Dancing with the Stars" yet!

[Purchasing Information for LeBaron's *The Choreography of Resolution*](#)

[Purchasing Information for Cloke's *The Dance of Opposites*](#)