

Sue and Steve Williams  
*Being in the Middle by Being at the Edge*  
(York: William Sessions Ltd)

Sue and Steve Williams have written a very useful study on mediation efforts in politically violent situations by drawing on the experiences of Quaker mediators usually working under the direction of Quaker Peace and Service (UK) or the American Friends Service Committee (USA). While the study focuses on some of the issues which arise in Quaker work – a religious body with its outlook of non-violence, a belief of “that of God” in every person, and a consensus form of decision-making – much of the study will be of value to others considering efforts in the conflict transformation field.

The use of non-official mediators is increasing as the recognition grows that there is a tragic disjuncture between the United Nations’ mandates and its ability to intervene in internal conflicts. As the UN Secretary-General wrote in his report to the Commission on Human Rights dealing with the theme of the fundamental standards of humanity “*At the present time, it is often situations of internal violence that pose the greatest threat to human dignity and freedom. The truth of this observation is born out in many countries around the world. The reports prepared by or for United Nations human rights bodies repeated draw attention to the link between human rights abuses and on-going violence and confrontation between armed groups and government forces, or simply between different armed groups...These situations are characterized by the existence of an armed challenge to the Government, in the form of one or more armed groups taking up arms in pursuit of, broadly speaking, political objectives. These objectives might include demands for more autonomy or even secession for particular ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities within the State concerned, overthrowing the existing Government, rejection of the existing constitutional order, or challenges to the territorial integrity of the State. In other situations, where an existing Government collapses or is unable or unwilling to intervene, armed groups fight among themselves, for example, for the right to establish a new Government or to ensure the supremacy or continuation of their own particular political programme.*”

The title of the book reflects two stages in the work of non-official mediations. At some stage, the mediator must be in the middle in order to build relationships, processes and connections; at a later stage, the mediator must be willing to move to the edge to allow the antagonists to come together and to negotiate in the light of their own interests.

As the Williams stress “*Mediation is only one possible form of intervention in a political conflict. Other choices including assisting a weaker party to become stronger in order to balance power (empowerment), training local people in conflict resolution skills, strengthening a peace constituency, and appealing for a judicial settlement to the dispute(international courts and arbitration. A continuing theme will be the importance of valuing and supporting all these ways of working rather than emphasising one to the exclusion of others. It may never be clear which approach, which activity, which structure gave the final push to bring about change. What is vital is to work together as well as possible, humbled by the efforts of others but also encouraged.*”

There are mediators who represent significant power of their own. The work of Henry Kissinger in the Middle East or Richard Holbrooke in the Yugoslav conflicts are examples. As Sydney Bailey has said *“Weaponless mediation and mediation-with-muscle have distinct but complementary roles. If the Middle East is any guide, the main role of the weaponless mediator is to identify and clarify issues, remove misperceptions, convey information and ideas, and promote goodwill to negotiate.”* Adam Curle, one of the most experienced Quaker mediators adds *“In general, governments achieve their results because they have the power to influence events, including the ability to reward or to punish. Paradoxically, the strength of citizen peacemakers resides specifically in their lack of power. They are neither feared nor courted for what they might do. Instead, they are trusted, and so may sometimes be enabled to play a part in peacemaking denied to most official diplomats.”*

The mediator has a number of techniques to reach these aims *“willingness to listen to all sides without taking sides, the possibility of building relationships of trust with significant individuals on all sides, being able to move back and forth between these individuals without much publicity, and a commitment to stay with the process as long as necessary but then to withdraw and get out of the way when a mediator is no longer needed.”*

A mediator, as a person who is in the middle listening to all sides in a conflict, must be someone with a tolerance for quite a wide range of viewpoints. Yet listening is not a purely neutral and passive act. One aspect of listening is that it permits, even obliges, the other person to set his thoughts in order, and to look at the causes and consequences of his actions.

In listening, the mediator must be able to deal with the realization that each of us is capable of evil and that even the most awful action cannot be a cause to break off contact. Discussions with the mediator make for a temporary break in the normalness of violence. As David Apter pointed out in his analysis of violence in Northern Ireland, violence breeds more violence because it *“develops its own meaning, language, discourse and structure. It becomes less a departure from the norms of ordinary life than a condition which generates its own objects. That is, violence creates its own ordering discourse.”*

Mediators who are willing to listen empathetically to all sides must be willing to maintain a tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty. As Everett Mendelsohn, a professor of the history of science at Harvard University, involved in Middle East mediation says *“too often, in this kind of work, you have to be able or willing to live with a lot greater ambiguity than you like. Not only the intellectual or substantive ambiguity, but also the ambiguity of the interaction, of whether something is happening in the best way.”* As Brewster Grace, who also worked in the Middle East adds *“This is an enormous conflict, and there is no way to be able, at any one time and in any one thought, to comprehend all of it. The sheer enormity of it gets to you after a while.”*

Although the mediator must be willing to live with ambiguity, he must also be able to analyse the situation as systematically as possible. As Mike Yarrow notes *“One cannot overemphasize the importance of knowledge and intelligent appraisal of the issues at stake, the factions involved, the background history, the sensitive points, the stated and the likely non-negotiable items, the elements of the conflict that may be alleviated, and so on. This kind of expertise makes all the difference between the well-intentioned bungler and the helpful mediator. All this proficiency does not have to be the endowment of one person of the team, but the resources need to be available. This is the point at which historians and conflict*

*analysts should be available to the practitioners, and the practitioners should know when they need such help.”*

The Williams draw upon a rich body of experience, and many will benefit from these reflections on conflict transformation?

René Wadlow

