

# What really matters in mediation?

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(Reflections from the Fishbowl conducted at the NSW Chapter meeting in July 2007)

One of my favorite children stories is the *Velveteen Rabbit* by Margarie Williams. It is the story of a stuffed rabbit that finds himself in a child's Christmas stocking. After a few hours of a joyous loving experience with the little boy he is discarded and moved into the nursery cupboard. The nursery is filled with toys, mechanical ones that put on airs and graces, strutting their modern looks and devices as well as toy soldiers and boats that attach themselves to the sense of superiority that comes with jargon and fresh paint.

In this environment of a modern nursery the rabbit gets a clear message that he is insignificant, unworthy and certainly of little value.

In this space the rabbit finds that the only kindness that he experiences comes from a toy horse that is balding, patchy and has obviously been around for a long time. One day the rabbit asks the horse "What is REAL?" A most leading question. The horse responds with, "Real isn't how you are made...it's a thing that happens to you...when a child really loves you....it takes time....when you are real you don't mind being hurt....once you are real you can't become unreal...." Real has depth, includes connecting on a level that is unmistakable when it is reached. The story unfolds in a way that puts attention on the connected feelings that grow between the child and the rabbit until one day the child declares with passion, that his bunny is not a toy. "It is REAL."

A moment of significance. The boy says the rabbit is real, the nanny says it is not real. It is a story that for me was the most important story I wanted my children to understand. I can remember reading this to my son with 'chicken skin'. Why? Because so much of what is presented to us in our society today is presented as important; the devices, technology, fresh paint and jargon while emotions that run deep such as kindness, care and gratitude, seem to have little value.

Real jobs are seen as jobs that have significance, have a purpose, and hold an identity that can be respected. Real relations are those that exist in space and time that offer more than superficial contact. Real includes knowing, meaningful and authentic. So who has access to real? Who is the judge of reality? If I want to know how much a property is worth I get a real estate valuer to give me a market appraisal, if I want to buy a real diamond ring I go to a shop that I trust will sell authentic diamond rings. I know that I don't know these things myself so I go outside of my guesswork and search for an expert.

So what are the implications and consequences of living in a community where experts are easily found in every capacity of my world. If I want a real diagnosis for a sickness

or a real treatment I am directed to specialists who are recognized as real experts. If my child is not behaving in the standard way either socially, academically or physically then I am directed to experts who have been trained to give a real assessment of my child. These experts are all seen as offering legitimate advice as opposed to ignorant advice that could be drawn from an amateur or non-professional. In fact this is the role of the professional, to offer an expert opinion that holds more weight than a non-professional.

Reality is something that can be bought from a professional expert, although perhaps that is what we are being led to believe in the marketplace.

To me it explains why the stuffed velveteen rabbit felt so insignificant in the modern nursery. The rabbit was not professional, it had nothing that you pressed or buzzed. The rabbit was not real at the beginning of the story no more that the modern toys were real, but the rabbit unlike the other toys became real over time and happenings. I think here lies a moment for reflection. Reality is such a tricky something that can, if narrowly defined misses out on such beautiful dimensions such as folk wisdom, imagination of possibilities, and appreciation for the hidden or back stage phenomena of life.

If someone should be in trouble with another that is not letting up, that is spiraling out of their control and taking over a good portion of time, energy and possibly costing health and financial resources then they would seek to put this trouble to rest. Should this trouble be related to law and should this trouble also be related to the expression of passionate emotions then questions of legal reality and psychological reality can enter the picture. It is not uncommon for us to seek expert opinions to put our questions of reality to the test. Am I normal, am I sick, am I clever, am I right, am I making the right decision? These are all questions that experts have come to determine that affect how we see reality. Reality in our modern world in fact has become the role of experts to decide for us. Where do we have the conversations that make us think about the nuances, the complexities, the uniqueness, the consequences and the impact that the certainty of a reality presents to us?

If the trouble is *which will should be respected*, the will that was made 3 years ago and signed by witnesses and in the hands of a legal firm, or the suicide note that was signed and left at the tragic end of a persons life; the question of legal and psychological realities can certainly determine an outcome. We have courts and experts such as lawyers, psychologists, counselors that hold roles in our society for handling just such trouble. And these people could take their trouble to these experts to make decisions on what reality will or could be.

If the people however choose to pursue the path of empowerment in decision making, by going to someone who will guide them in peace making as opposed to decision taking, to transform the trouble to ease, then what reality will guide them in this? What reality is critical for them to know about, to have information about, to pursue and draw on in order to have their trouble be put to rest?

If we take the meaning of reality to include folk wisdom, imagination of possibilities, and appreciation for the hidden or back stage phenomena of life then who would provide this information or know-how in the self determining context for the 'trouble of the wills'?

I suppose it comes back to the choice of whether one wants to understand the reality of what led into and will lead out of the trouble of the wills and hence be part of the journey of peaceful reality creating, or whether one prefers to purchase an off the rack reality that is not unique to their trouble but can be adopted.

So what really matters in mediation can be determined by the parties and the mediator - a set of realities that professionals have as their resources to draw on; or an exploration that begins with uncertainty and curiosity and includes the hidden or back stage phenomenon of life.