THE MEDIATOR AS THE EYE OF THE STORM: ACTIVE PERCEPTION OF EMOTIONS THROUGH THE NONVERBAL[1]

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I. Introduction

In Eastern Congo, tensions were high in the spring of 2006. The previous decade of bloody atrocities filled everyone's memories. The current calm looked precarious and the upcoming elections forecasted further storms. As a facilitator of a meeting in Goma, I watched the first attendees enter the room and observed. No one said a word, but some shoulders seemed to carry the weight of the entire world. Everyone seemed uptight and stared at each other. I noticed that no one sat next to one participant. I could sense the heaviness and discomfort. The atmosphere was ice-cold and ominous. The meeting had not started yet, but already tensions were rising. There's nothing easy or casual about sharing a room with your "enemy." There was no need for words; it was enough to look around. One could easily make sense of the silence. A colleague whispered to me that the person no one would sit next to was the former head of security in town, responsible for mass arrests, including the son of one of the female participants…

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> *I decided to break the ice and commenced the meeting. Opening my arms, and smiling, I thanked everyone for coming. I acknowledged that it wasn't easy for many to sit here, but that it was indispensable for a peaceful future in North Kivu, and that I was convinced we would all do a good job together. Already I saw some participants smiling in return, warming up, relaxing slightly. (AL)*[4]

The scene above illustrates the importance of mediators' "being-there" (Heidegger, 1962*)*, with eyes wide open from the start. Straightaway, they are thrown in the epicenter of a conflict. If they are mindful, they can strive to be fully aware of the parties. Doing so, they awaken all their senses, and put them to work at once in order to grasp parties' emotions through non-verbal clues. They seek the deepest possible understanding of the parties and become the calm eye in the storm. Mediators "feel" the room temperature, subtly sense the tensions, and immediately act accordingly to try to defuse them. By starting on the right foot and continuing their conscious efforts to actively perceive parties all the way through the session, mediators cultivate an atmosphere for authentic exchanges and improve the likelihood of a responsible, satisfactory outcome.

Stone, Patton, and Heen (2010) point out that feelings are often at the heart of difficult conversations. Mediators must see them on the spot and then address them properly, as they often go hand-in-hand with tensions. If not handled well, toxic emotions have the power to derail mediations, with significant risks to delay, or to prevent, any potential agreement, and they may even escalate the conflict. Thus, how mediators grasp, acknowledge and manage emotions, even when no one is saying anything, plays a key role in order to succeed. This explains why mediators are often trained to be on alert, and tune themselves to emotions, theirs and the parties'.

[4] For more information about this workshop: see Wolpe and al., 2006.

Although emotions arise in both parties and mediators, and often interrelate, this text focuses on the mediators' capacity to activate all their senses to better perceive the emotions that parties display, including in their latent form. The mediation process calls for an enhanced capacity of mediators to decode emotions by paying special attention to nonverbal communication. When mediators access the nonverbal, they can better detect the presence of emotions in a timely manner and identify them accurately.

II. Watch for Latent Emotions – Do Not Wait for Patent Emotions

Paul Ekman, world expert on emotions, writes that "emotions are a process, a particular kind of automatic appraisal influenced by our evolutionary and personal past, in which we sense that something important to our welfare is occurring" (2003, p.13). Emotions have the potential to reveal a great deal about human beings' underlying motivations and priorities. Mediators play a key role in this discovery process, if and when they catch emotions being expressed.

Naturally, at the point when a party is pounding their fists and yelling, most mediators notice the presence of emotion and can label it as anger. In this type of clear and loud form, it is easy to identify *patent* expressions of emotions, such as anger, which are only the tip of the emotional iceberg. They are easy to spot, because the emotional storm is fully active. A mediator's mission is broader and deeper: it is to explore emotions underneath the surface, in their *latent* form, well before they reach their climax. In order to access the submerged part of the emotional iceberg, mediators have to excel at perceiving early signals, revealing emotions before their outburst.

In fact, it is possible to identify emotions early on in the process, long before the point of "no return," i.e. before the "emotional redline," where parties lose control. According to Paul Ekman however, "we are often so focused on what the person is saying that we miss the subtle signs [indicating emotions] completely" (2003, p.76). His research further shows "that most of us are not very good at recognizing how other people are feeling unless their expressions are pretty strong."

Revealing the onset of emotions in a timely manner matters in leading meaningful conversations in the right direction towards appeasement and resolution. Therefore, understanding emotions and reading them *early and accurately,* becomes a critical skill for mediators. Consider two different scenarios that mediators face:

> ***Scenario 1: Identifying patent emotions too late:*** *Imagine a first hypothesis where, at the mediation table, Party 1 discusses a possible solution, and Party 2 suddenly interrupts. Party 1 ignores the interruption and pursues her line of thoughts, but the tension slowly grows, especially when Party 2 interrupts her again, claiming that her ideas "make no sense at all!" Soon, the mediation really isn't going anywhere and comes to an abrupt halt.*

At this point, a mediator may decide to mitigate the situation by acknowledging how hard it might be for parties to listen to each other's ideas, or by gently reminding everyone of established ground rules on interruption. But the task has become arduous, as frustration and anger were allowed to intensify without checks. Perhaps the mediator is even obliged to suspend the joint session and ask for a caucus, giving parties time to cool down before returning together in the room. In the worst-case scenario, when a mismanaged emotion like anger reaches its extreme form, it can potentially destroy the mediation altogether.

> ***Scenario 2: Identifying latent emotions early enough:*** *Imagine now a second hypothesis. Party 1 presents her ideas. As she does this, the mediator is actively watching the non-verbal behavior of Party 2 and sees contempt in formation, with one side of the lip tightened and raised. The mediator also recognizes some signs of impatience when Party 2 begins fidgeting in his chair. When Party 1 is interrupted for the first time, the mediator notices Party 1's eyebrows pull down, and her lips narrow, indicating anger.*

In Scenario 2, the mediator who is highly perceptive recognized that one or both parties started being "contemptuous," "impatient,"

or “angry,” when the emotion was beginning or still hidden. In this case, maybe she could pause and check-in with the party in question. By identifying emotion in its early stage, the mediator has the capacity to act preventively: she can acknowledge early on what is happening, and let both parties express themselves before negative emotions build and get to unmanageable levels.

The two scenarios outline that mediators have a responsibility to watch closely what is happening, to open their eyes, and not simply keep their ears attentive. They must also consider two separate issues: *early warning* or not, and then *early action* or not. Of course, early awareness of emotions is the necessary condition for early intervention, but it is not sufficient. Some mediators will be more or less *perceptive* and others will be more or less *active*, as they face cues of mounting emotions. This text mostly addresses the first question, though it recognizes that mediators must learn “to deal with emotions,” and come up with strategies of *timely and appropriate intervention* in order to avoid failures of the mediation process.

How can we support mediators who wish to increase their awareness of parties’ emotions? How can we awaken their senses so they can recognize emotions promptly? Our hypothesis is that by concentrating some of their efforts on how the parties express themselves beyond words and on what “every *body* is saying” (Navarro, 2008), mediators can increase their chance of spotting parties’ emotions before they become so strong that they disrupt the process. To better perceive emotions in their early stages, mediators should go beyond relying mostly on a single sense – hearing – and activate all their senses, as much as possible. The next section of this text will discuss how “active sensing” or “active perceiving” can support mediators in their ongoing quest to understand and serve their parties better.

III. Practice Active Sensing – Open your Eyes

Roger Fisher and William Ury (1991) prescribe that negotiators should separate people from problems. Mediators often apply this advice in the management of the process, shifting attention between people and problems. As meeting facilitators, they learn how to invite parties to focus on underlying motivations and

interests, rather than positions, in order to further a spirit of problem-solving. Should they note emotions intensifying, they refocus on people, acknowledge feelings, and wait until parties feel validated and cool down to turn back to the problems. Because "negotiators are people first" (Fisher and Ury, 1991 p.18), in addition to developing the capacity to *shift from one focus to another,* the initial negotiation sequence might require to focus on people first before moving on to problem-solving prematurely (Lempereur, Colson & Pekar, 2010).

One way of putting people first in conflict resolution is paying greater attention to what parties are communicating and, in particular, what emotions they are expressing in the first place. In that respect, Rogers and Farson (1987) stress the importance of the active listening technique to deepen understanding. Their tool has become *common* practice for mediators who strive to increase empathy towards the parties. Facilitators should not simply listen *passively* to parties; they are urged to *actively* demonstrate understanding, i.e. paraphrasing what they heard in their own words and checking with the party that they correctly understood what was said. Active listening is about the mediator restating facts, opinions and emotions that each party expressed, but also providing parties an opportunity to hear the other side's story through a third party's voice. Many times, mediators end up identifying and then acknowledging what Fisher and Shapiro (2005) summarize as five core concerns of the parties in conflict: appreciation, affiliation, roles, status, and autonomy. Active listening, because it does not simply assume understanding but checks it, is already a meaningful first step in mediation to increase understanding, including emotions, but it can be pushed further by summoning more senses to that purpose.

A person is more than words, and the mediator is more than ears. By only using "active listening," mediators rely too heavily on hearing and deprive themselves of signals communicated through other senses. They risk missing the person as a whole. On the contrary, if they mobilize other senses, they get closer to grasp the entire human being. Indeed, as people, we communicate through words, gestures, voice intonation, eye contact, facial expressions, etc. And as recipients of that communication, we can perceive with more than our ears. The question is how can mediators access

such a wealth of extra information that often provides subtle access to underlying emotions?

In addition to "active listening," mediators can be encouraged to be more holistic recipients of communication through "active sensing" or "active perceiving." This broader tool implies using as many senses as relevant to read and understand a person and, each time when it is appropriate, checking in with that person to verify that what has been sensed is accurate. In active perceiving, the mediator pays attention to verbal *and* nonverbal communication. Active listening becomes thus part of a more encompassing approach. Active perceiving complements the data already procured by the "one-sense" active listening. As a next step, a simple increase from one sense to two, if not five, can, in fact, already ensure important complementary information: "E^2" supposes the combined use of *eyes and ears*; it implements active perception to the next level. As noted by CIA investigators, those who want to perform better in lie-detection can "look and listen," what is called "L^2" (Cheshire, 2014). The following illustration explains how active perceiving works, when it involves the mediator's eyes.

> *During a session, a mediator noted that one of the parties went from sitting up straight to slouching back in their chair with their arms crossed. By recognizing this behavioral change, the mediator, without putting that party on the spot, can gently check in with the party, when appropriate, what this change entails. There could be several hypotheses explaining the gesture. First, it is possible the party is cold and tired from having spent one hour in a chair. In this case, refocusing on people leads the mediator to turn up the heat or call for a five-minute break so that the parties can reenergize themselves before reengaging in another round. Second, crossing arms might also mean that the party is feeling disconnected from the conversation or even adversarial, upset that it isn't going as well as planned: the party has "closed" himself off to the discussion. In this second case, the mediator has*

another series of process options that she can use: more questions, caucus, etc.

This "crossing arms" example suggests that practicing active sensing and leveraging visual clues helps prevent the mediators from making erroneous assumptions about the individual's emotional state, but instead allows them to follow up observations with an ensuing inquiry in order to subtly test various hypotheses. In the case above, disconnection was one of at least two possible interpretations. *Active* perceiving, like *active* listening, requires testing one's interpretations of what was sensed, and not settling on the first hypothesis. This enhanced "empathy loop" (Mnookin & al., 1996) helps mediators improve their capacity to detect complementary information, including the presence of specific emotions.

While active listening engages one of our senses, it overemphasizes the importance of hearing words, often favoring only verbal and logical forms of intelligence in mediators, which can fall short in assessing the complexity of human reality and its expression. Active sensing asks mediators to increase emotional awareness and intelligence (Goleman, 2005). This encourages them, in turn, to mobilize other forms of intelligence, in themselves and with others, i.e. more of the intra- and inter-personal intelligence (Gardner, 2006). Because the majority of communication is nonverbal, mediators have an interest in not being lost in their papers or in their thoughts, but in keeping gentle eye-contact with all parties at all times. By doing so, they maintain a strong connection with the parties, as full human beings. They broaden their scope of perception, and activate more of their senses and intelligence forms in a meeting. With sharper observation, they understand better what people transmit beyond words. They start leveraging the nonverbal.

IV. Scan Emotion Presence through the Nonverbal

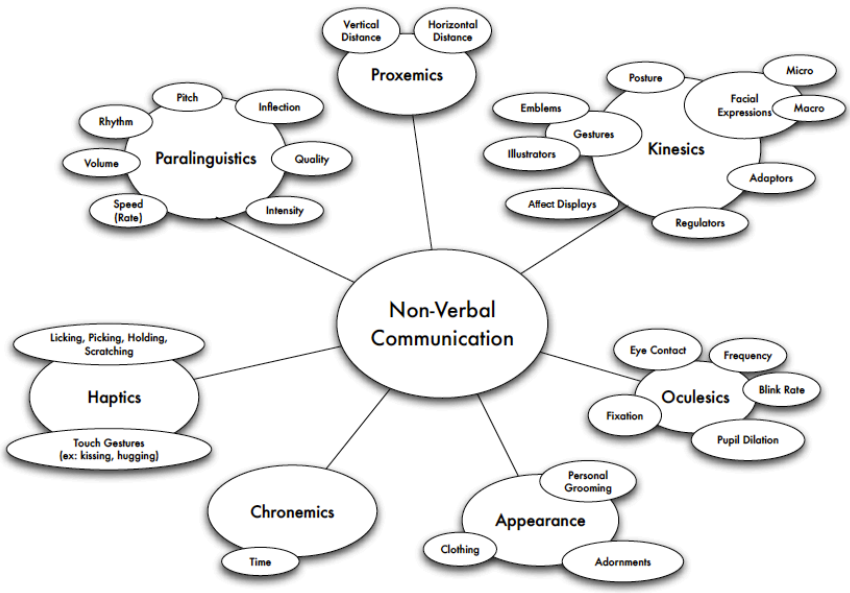
At its core, mediation involves a collection of people striving to solve their problems with the help of a third party. It means trying to find mutually agreeable solutions that parties can live with in the future. But before these possibilities are even envisioned, parties have to address the past, often reliving hard experiences and

grievances. During this process of uncovering, parties inevitably feel painful emotions, whether they are aware of them or not. When one party proposes a possible solution, it might look so insulting to the other side that a new set of negative emotions may emerge. Many times, even when parties are in denial and trying to mask their feelings, emotions will be expressed nonverbally.

There is some debate amongst scientists as to whether or not humans are feeling emotions at every moment of the day (Ekman, 2003, p. 19), but there is consensus that emotions generate physical and chemical reactions that help us handle whatever stimulus has sparked the emotion. Those physical and chemical reactions are communicated with others, often through visible gestures and language. But since only a very small percentage of human communication is expressed verbally (Albert Mehrabian's original studies suggested only 7%), the majority of emotions will, in fact, be revealed nonverbally (Mehrabian, 1971).

The term nonverbal communication covers a whole host of aspects ranging from body movement to the tone of voice. Figure 1 illustrates the richness of nonverbal communication.

FIGURE 1



To summarize Figure 1, there are seven major subfields in nonverbal communication:

- *Paralinguistics:* This subfield refers to the components of speech, like the pitch, volume, speed or rhythm, which modify the meaning of words and convey emotion. For example, parties would raise their voice, when they become upset.
- *Proxemics:* Edward T. Hall (1966) first used this term to describe the study of the spatial separation individuals maintain between each other, and how this separation relates to environmental and cultural factors. For instance, a party can lean forward as a sign of interest in what the other says, but he can also get closer to another party as anger grows in a threatening position.
- *Kinesics:* A term first coined by Ray Birdwhistell (1952), kinesics comprises the gestures, movement, stance, and posture used to communicate with others. Often, a party who dislikes another person or his statement would cross her legs in the opposite direction, showing internal frustration or contempt.
- *Oculesics:* Although sometimes considered a subcategory of kinesics, oculesics is the study of eye behavior. Pupil dilation can show for example an intense interest in what is discussed. The lack of eye contact might indicate a sense of guilt.
- *Appearance:* This includes both the physical appearance of a person (such as choice in clothing, hair style, etc.) and the surrounding environment. Wearing a tie may indicate how important or formal the meeting is conceived.
- *Chronemics:* Thomas J. Bruneau (1980) studied how time unfolds in communication. For example, some deep analysis of a situation might look like a waste of time to a party and grow impatience. Long moments of silence, that might be useful to some, can be frustrating to others.
- *Haptics:* This refers to the various ways humans communicate with one another through touch. A person who is familiar with someone else and shares his views would gently touch his arm, as a sign of proximity and joy. A person who dislikes another person may not shake hands.

As emotions get expressed nonverbally in so many ways, only mediators who are looking for them through a technique like *active sensing or perceiving* can detect them. Such technique enhances the capacity to understand and integrate the different components of nonverbal communication. As mediators increase their awareness and knowledge from these seven subfields of nonverbal communication, they learn to progressively perceive more data and thus spot subtle flashes of emotions, even in unintentional and masked forms.

Mediators are privy to a whole rich view of human interaction, because parties are working through their conflict right before their eyes. A typical behavior of parties (and humans in general) is to try to withhold showing their emotions for fear that it will make them look weak, vulnerable, or indicate how much they care (Lempereur, Colson, Pekar 2010). Sometimes, parties may not even be aware themselves of an emerging emotion. But emotion, once revealed, can become a helpful indicator of what is needed for parties to move beyond their current conflict state.

> *In Gitega (Burundi), in May 2004, I facilitated a workshop with commanders of the regular army and of the rebel groups. They had been fighting each other for the many years, and they were now asked to sit in the same room together, which at best was odd. The initial interactions were highly superficial. Participants were courteous, but they looked detached, distant, and hesitant to engage the other side. They were physically there, but not mindfully present, as if they were hiding something. Lack of trust prevented them from showing any indication of what was important to the other side. Everyone was reluctant to show their cards, their real self.*
>
> *At some point, the mediation team realized that parties were wasting their time and so were we. As mediators, we proposed to leverage role reversal. We asked the commanders of each side to change roles, and to put themselves in the other's shoes in order to understand what the other side really*

> *thought and felt of them. And there it was, we started hearing the "real stuff," like "I doubt that if this rebel becomes a general, I will ever become one," or "I fear their contempt, that if we, as rebels, integrate the army, we will always be considered as second class citizens in the army, because we did not graduate from the military academy," or "He is upset that now he has to divide the already scarce resources of the army with us," or "He believes I never learnt anything serious in the bushes, and that I am just a country boy stealing his job," etc. There it was: many emotions, like fear, contempt or anger, were out in all their forms, and underneath, parties expressed meaningful worries about the future. Now, as emotions had surfaced, they could address these underlying concerns in order to strengthen the creation of an integrated army. (AL)*

This real-life scenario shows that when mediators are able to spot disengagement, get participants to expose their underlying concerns in creative ways, and reorient parties in joint construction that allowed a healthy expression of emotions, parties become able to move on to the next steps. It is important to scan the room and watch how parties occupy, or evolve in, the space around them; i.e. how their gestures and body language capture their thoughts and moods. As mediators refine their perceptiveness through active sensing, in this instance, they are better able to ascertain parties' levels of confidence and their fears or aversions to one another. By watching the nonverbal expressions in their daily practice and by learning to boost interpretation of clues through gentle questioning, mediators become aware of the greater picture that is offered to them and they are more likely to guide parties through deeper common understanding towards mutual acknowledgement and responsible agreements.

The point we are making here is that even before connecting visual data to a specific emotion, before unpacking what they see, mediators need to be aware *there might be an emotion present* and increase their readiness to spot its signs. It is critical that mediators become more conscious of how emotions adopt multiple shapes of expressions – gestures, space moves, tone of voice, facial

expressions, mimics, etc. Being aware of emotion presence is only the first step however, because it is equally as important to detect the emotions in a timely fashion.

V. Detect Emotions as Early as Possible

> *In the fall of 2003, in Ngozi (Burundi), the Burundi Leadership Training Program was running a leaders' workshop to support the peace process after the Arusha agreement between all Burundian factions. As one of two head facilitators, my role was to permanently ensure fluid conversation among the leaders. Many in the room were former belligerents and fought each other in the field. One day, a conversation became heated and although it is difficult to recall the specifics of the discussion, it was obvious that one participant was disconcerted. His gestures were ample and his voice was strong. He was a man of large stature, and he held a significant position in the Burundian establishment. He started arguing loudly, demonstrating his power in front of others, and directed his arguments directly at me, as facilitator. My responding comments unfortunately further polarized the conversation and when it was time to change topics, the man would not desist. This led to an increase in tension. Finally, I asked my co-facilitator to take over, but I wish I had done this earlier. (AL)*[5]

No doubt stakes were high that day, and so were associated emotions, like a strong sense of self-righteousness and impatience. It was a dangerous cocktail and the mediator let emotions run the show, and take over the conversation. Although passing the relay was a good move, it came too late. In a matter of seconds, the facilitation became a spectacle. The problem is that the mediator did not *see* it coming. Fortunately, after he removed himself from the conversation for a time, the process could resume more smoothly, but other scenarios do not end so well. Had the mediator

[5] For more information about this workshop: see Wolpe and Al., 2003.

detected the escalating emotions earlier, he might have been able to explore other options to ensure a smoother process.

Mediators have all experienced emotional surges similar to the one just described. When negative emotions get in the driver seat and go from mild to strong, they can quickly lead to a temporary madness. But do humans really go from unemotional to emotional that fast? Or before emotions become patent, should we look for their latent signs? Consider the *timeline of emotions* (Lempereur, Colson & Pekar, 2010, p. 164) to be a continuum that a party may experience: discomfort leads to being upset, which might evolve to frustration, anger, and possibly, rage. In some ways, the emotion "anger" has its degrees, and anger management is easier at the early stages. Mediators need to watch for the transformation cues of an emotion, as it progressively intensifies.

Of course, from general observations in our lives, we note that certain people are slower to show intense forms of emotions, whereas others turn more quickly. We also realize that some behaviors, issues or people trigger us faster than others. However, scientific reports (Ekman, 2003) assure us that each emotion has unique signals most easily seen in the face and that we can learn to identify emotions, as they are just beginning and when they are being suppressed.

We call on active sensing to help mediators explore parties' nonverbal communication, whether through facial expression or body gestures, and within facial expressions, between micro- or macro-expressions. Sometimes *seeing* that there is an emotion, even if we do not know which one it is, is already a step forward on the awareness path, and in active perceiving. If mediators do not know which emotion it is, they can gently probe and ask questions. Because our sensing might be misleading, this is one more reason to be subtly inquisitive and open to learn from a party what she is going through. She might not want to share it with the mediators, but at least, she is offered a platform to do so. If the "emotional state" persists, maybe a break or caucus might be a safer space to explore it in confidence between one party and the mediator.

Needless to say, if someone's anger has turned to rage and they are expressing it by suddenly standing up, shouting and slamming the door, it is likely that anger was leaked earlier in the conversation. Although some mediators are still capable of guiding the parties through extremely emotional periods, often, cases of rage will hurt the relationship and create deadlocks because trust, if any even existed, has vanished and the mediator will need to start over, and rebuild a connection not simply between parties, but with each one. If emotions are perceived earlier, mediators can potentially refocus on people as such, on their underlying emotions, and avoid starting over from the beginning.

The goal therefore remains for mediators to spot *emotions in general* in the room as soon as possible. A final skill that mediators need to develop is the ability to recognize and name the *exact emotion* expressed in nonverbal communication, including when it first emerges.

VI. Decipher Emotions as Accurately as Possible

It may seem logical that if mediators should strive to detect the presence of emotions, and do so in a timely manner, they should also learn to identify the emotions correctly. This is why research on facial expressions and body language is very important to learn about. However, depending on the person, the identification of the right emotion may be harder to decode than it seems. How many times, when the conversation gets heated, do we not hear a person tell the other emphatically: "Gosh, you are SO emotional!"? So often, we might get the fact that someone is getting "emotional," but the very word "emotional" becomes so imprecise that it lacks usefulness and precision. Again, active sensing helps mediators move past the basic recognition that a party is becoming "emotional" and helps mediators look for several clues indicating more specifically which emotions are at stake.

For instance, Paul Ekman has identified universal expressions for seven emotions: surprise, happiness, fear, anger, sadness, contempt, and disgust (2003). Though display rules vary, these emotions can be read on the faces of all humans, no matter their ethnic or cultural backgrounds. Macro-expressions last between one-fourth and four seconds, whereas micro-expressions last only

one-twenty-fifth of a second and happen when a person is deliberately or unconsciously trying to conceal an emotion. “Most people don't recognize the emotions shown in these micro-expressions. But people can learn to see them.” (Ekman, 2009) Macro-expressions are naturally easier and faster to read than micro-expressions, and like for any new language, we need to start with the easy reading first.

We urge mediators to develop a sharper approach and learn to identify the exact emotion a party is feeling. As mentioned, different people show different abilities in recognizing emotions, which can be tested. Anyone who is interested in evaluating his or her skills in recognizing facial expressions, for example, might consult a micro-expression expert website to get a better sense of how skilled they are. Here, they can also work on improving their capacity. As with anything, some people are naturally more gifted in this domain and others need to put in more effort. In the same way that some people are colorblind, some might be emotion-blind; they might have a hard time differentiating within the spectrum of various emotions. In any case, with the appropriate tools, anyone can improve their recognition of emotions in facial expressions.

Because the reading of emotions is crucial for their mission, mediators must learn to move past the sheer recognition that a party becomes “emotional” and pinpoint the emotion expressed in a particular moment. The same way they should focus on the correct interests to “problem solve,” they should focus on the correct emotions to “people solve.” The capacity to figure out what a person feels in exact terms goes a long way in acknowledging a person. It is a powerful tool helping to work through conflict, as emotions are also connected to the issues and priorities of the party. Once the mediation is focused on a double set of motivations – the people’s emotions and their interests – it becomes possible to grasp the complex identity and motivations of each party, and there is a greater likelihood for a responsible outcome, both in terms of agreement and of a working relationship to ensure proper implementation.

> *In a divorce case, parties are often stuck on issues of assets and kids. These substantive issues become*

> *a battlefield that is hiding the extensive frustrations felt by husband or wife. When, for example, a spouse considers she was never truly recognized for her contribution to the marriage and feels she has been humiliated for years, she may fight to be granted full custody of the children and substantial sums of money in the name of making a point. However, all the money in the world and full custody of the children will not address the true causes of the emotions, such as anger and sadness experienced by the divorcee. The mediators, by insisting that the parties "remain calm and rational," by focusing only at the surface on assets and kids, instead of uncovering the exact underlying emotions at stake, may have lost an opportunity for the spouses' growth, both as people and as problem-solvers. Even if they finally get what they* wanted *out of mediation, spouses may leave a session, feeling as if they were never heard, i.e. frustrated and unhappy about the process, because they did not get what they* needed.

If left unaddressed, emotions often escalate and fester, ultimately restricting a person's field of vision and ability to accept new information. "When we are gripped by an emotion we discount or ignore knowledge we already have that could disconfirm the emotion we are feeling, just as we ignore or discount new information coming to us from our environment that doesn't fit our emotion." (Ekman, 2003, p. 39)

On the contrary, learning to spot emotion early and accurately allows the mediator to explore and discuss what is sparking the emotions before they intensify. Their precise identification equally contributes to an increase in the mediator's process options.

> *I will never forget a conversation that I witnessed between two members of the Hutu and Tutsi communities in Gitega, Burundi. They were standing in front of each other, exchanging at a cocktail party. Apparently everything looked normal, but after a few minutes, I noticed how one*

of the men was staring at the other. He was smiling, almost smirking, with one side of the mouth, slightly higher than the other. This particular expression is an indicator of contempt. This person was looking at the other with disdain, a sense of superiority, as if the other did not matter.

I decided to take him aside and then we had a long conversation. I asked him what he really felt about the other side and first he pretended he had no clue what I was alluding to. But then I told him that I may have been mistaken, but somehow I had sensed a derisive smile. It was a difficult conversation, where there was probably some denial, but the risks of one party's contempt towards another could have blocked the process and it was important that this be addressed in private caucus. I did not want to let it go, as if I had not seen it, as if it did not happen. It could have poisoned the entire process. (AL)

Tensions might take place at a macro-level between communities, but then trickle down into a micro-level between individuals, and reversely. The risks of displaying arrogance (even unconsciously) towards a member of the other community can enlarge the gap between individuals and perpetuate conflict indefinitely between communities. In this case, the mediator was able to read the nonverbal signs and made the conscious decision that the party should be confronted about the particular emotion he exhibited and the potentially unintended consequences on the process.

Spotting the relevant emotion provides mediators and parties with additional information on which they can build. It is as much about self-discovery or validation for a party, as it is about venturing into the complexity of a human being's identity for the other party and the mediator. This extensive active sensing work that the mediators can embark on can also lead them to new tactics for mutual acknowledgement of emotions before, and with a view of problem-solving.

VII. Conclusion on Finding the Calm in the Storm

Mediators are eyes in the storm. Because of what they see around them by scanning the nonverbal, they have this unique opportunity to act as *mitigators of toxic emotions* – the parties', and sometimes their own. At other times, because they can help the parties move from the conflict zone and enter the peaceful zone of coexistence, mediators can also act as *"catalysts,"* helping parties to surface and release their emotions, to vent and to put them past them, to detach themselves from them so that they can join the mediator in the eye of the storm, where it is calmer. By so doing the mediator can help them explore a future away from the storm.

> *In general, as a facilitator of group conversations, I like to walk and move around in the room in order to get closer to anyone who wishes to speak. Sometimes I even hand over the microphone so that everyone can hear the person, leaving me side-by-side the speaker. This dynamic approach has worked pretty well over the years. It ensures a spatial proximity to all the parties for me as the moderator, that I find particularly effective to maintain the connection with them. But once, I was faced with an unusual situation. In a meeting with about twenty people in a small room, a person asked to speak. When it was his turn, instead of talking from his chair as everyone else had done before, he moved forward and decided to stand up. He was literally facing me, like in a boxing match. I immediately sensed posturing and negative emotion of anger and contempt attached to the gesture.*
>
> *I realized that two people standing in front of each other, like we were, might look like a potential contest between us. Instead of helping move the conversation forward, this competitive posturing could derail the whole conversation as a contest of wills. So, I did something I never do. I decided to sit in my own chair. In retrospect, I believe that in doing so, the situation deescalated. (AL)*

In order to be these gentle eyes in the storm, we are calling for a renewed *people focus* and its *nonverbal shift,* to go beyond words and active listening, and incorporate active sensing or perceiving, i.e. at least to look and listen, to gather comprehensive information from parties in real time, including their emotional state. We hope mediators are pushed to evaluate their awareness, timeliness and sharpness in this new world beyond words. They can be curious and explore it further, themselves and with the parties. They can do more than mitigate emotions, they can leverage them, when they are still manageable, on their journey to responsible agreements. Learning to better grasp the nonverbal and emotions is a lot like learning a new language. It takes repetition and practice, as well as some proper training. But mediators all have the potential to improve their ability in this other language, to make visible what often remains invisible.

However, as mediators begin experimenting with active sensing and engaging the emotions through the nonverbal, we must remain humble. It can take years to develop the ability to read emotions correctly. And even when we have identified the right emotion, we must remain cautious, because reading an emotion does not yield perfect knowledge of why a party is feeling it. Continuous inquiry and feedback remains necessary to test hypotheses and question each assumption. *Knowing what people are feeling does not mean knowing what they are thinking***.**

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