

# “Mediator: A Life on the Edge of History”

This title is a tribute to the late Ted Sorensen (1928-2010) former Counsel, Advisor and Speechwriter for President John F. Kennedy (JFK) (1917-1963).



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Mr. Sorensen’s book “Counselor: A Life on the Edge of History”, published in 2008, addressed the origin of JFK’s famous quote from the Jan. 20<sup>th</sup>, 1961 inaugural address, “Ask not what your country can do for you-ask what you can do for your country”. He would never engage in inquiries again on the origin. If anyone were to question him on where the “Ask not...” line came from, especially in relation to Kahlil Gibran, he answered “Ask not!”

For decades, the source of JFK’s phrase came under debate, whether it was original, plagiarized or influenced by previous similar quotes. One persistent question remained whether it came from something that the Lebanese-American poet, philosopher and artist, Kahlil Gibran had written long ago.

In this article, I will tell a story about how mediation guidelines were applied to seek to obtain necessary information from Mr.

Sorensen for my research on the matter and support my findings.

Let me provide a brief back-

ground. In Dec. 2007, I was an attendee at a week-long conference on conflict resolution in the Middle East which traveled to various locations beginning in

Tiberius on the Sea of Galilee where an opening speaker ended his presentation with “Ask not...” phrase, attributing it of course to JFK.

I approached the speaker and told him it was my understanding this famous line was drawn from something Gibran had written, but I did not know the source. He suggested to me, especially as a lawyer, that I ‘prove’ this thesis.

So, I embarked on eighteen months of research. The academic details of what led to my literary/historical conclusion in the unraveling of the mystery surrounding this topic will be available when the Gibran conference proceedings are published this year.

Mediators may be interested in the process on how the research was conducted and completed. The core point is the communications with Mr. Sorensen.

When I emailed Mr. Sorensen at the New York law firm where he was Counsel, a reply came back from someone that I should read his book where he clearly stated that he would never engage in such inquiries again.

**I was stumped, and frustrated.**

A thought came to me to go back to basics: I wondered if principled negotiation may play a role in resuming this conversation with him on a valued-based approach on getting past a stated ‘position’?

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I decided to seek to discover what Mr. Sorensen's 'underlying interest' might be to transcend his position. In looking into his other activities, I discovered that he was the Founding Chair of the Advisory Board to Brandeis University International Centre for Ethics, Justice and Public Life. Willing to explore testing the frontiers of these negotiating principles, this time I emailed him at the Brandeis Centre, asking him if my probe might meet the objectives of the Centre's intentions for ethics in history.

To my pleasant surprise, Mr. Sorensen replied himself and asked what I wanted to know. After composing myself, I did manage to get not one but two more email questions answered by him. Without this information my research would not have been historically complete.

At the end of 18 months I wrote an essay which ironically actually disproved the theory that Kennedy's quote came from Gibran. This led me into a mediation-type approach with the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library to include Gibran's similar but much different wording in their genealogy of quotes on their website. They have posted many similar quotes from writers from the West, and since both Kennedy and Gibran were both devoted to reconciliation of East and West, I felt that posting Gibran's similar thinking from something he wrote in 1921 (in Arabic), particularly in these times, would manifest their common goal.

In the fall of 2010 an Arabic translation of my essay appeared in a prestigious journal in Lebanon. The Reference Archivist at the JFK

Presidential Library indicated that if an independent English journal would publish my paper, they may consider my request.

I was privileged with the encouragement of the amiable and brilliant Professor Suheil Bushrui, Gibran Chair at University of Maryland in Hyattsville, and the support, among others, of respected poet and teacher, Mr. Henri Zoghaib, Director of the Centre for Lebanese Heritage at the Lebanese-American University of Beirut to present my essay to an inspiring four-day international conference on Gibran at the University of Maryland in May, 2012.

After the presentation and academic review, it was determined that my conclusions on this issue were soundly based, scholarly and worthy of consideration by the JFK Presidential Library. The attendees at the conference were most interested in the communication principles and process that were applied to obtain the necessary information from Mr. Sorensen.

### This experience has epitomized a journey in ADR.

It's ironical that this Gibran conference "Reading Gibran in an Age of Globalization and Conflict" and the ability to receive informa-

tion from Mr. Sorensen were based on mediation principles. At the same time I am honoured to be appointed recently as Advisor to the International Association for the Study of the Life and Works of Kahlil Gibran, an International NGO. These coincidences seem to evidence a growing ADR theme permeating all levels of society.

This new advisory work on Good Governance protocols at the International NGO level is a timely extension of my activities in Canada working on programs for provincial and federal NGOs for Boards, their advisors, members and stakeholders.

For Ted Sorensen, aging and in failing health when he responded to my inquiries, I wish to acknowledge his energy, courage, honesty and co-operation. He showed how he walked his talk in his role as Founding Chair of the Advisory Board to Brandeis University International Centre for Ethics, Justice and Public Life. He left an indelible re-establishment of my faith in the heartfelt work we all do as intervenors, in particular the role of seeking underlying interests to find common ground.

I wish to say thank you Mr. Sorensen, for this legacy and reminding us, with one person, one issue at a time, that there is hope for the human family. 🙏

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