

agreement ... there was no longer an agreement ... she wanted to keep the child ... and I had hoped that it would be my child and me and Mario would be the primary caregivers of Samuel. (MEDIATOR: OK.) so today ...

- 17 Mediator What's your hope for today?
- 18 Dennis I hope to ... kind of find my role.
- 19 Mediator Find my role.
- 20 Dennis Find a role that works for myself ... Mario ... Marlene
- 21 Mediator And Mario is your partner?
- 22 Dennis Yeah ... he's my partner.
- 23 Mediator Sorry ... continue ... I interrupted you just to clarify that there.
- 24 Dennis Oh yeah ... just ... like a role for myself, Mario and as well as Marlene ... that best ... that will provide the best for Samuel's life.
- 25 Mediator OK ... So it's like a conversation you're hoping will be one that has this kind of discovery in it that you would find this ... this role and that you would work out what these roles are for each of you?

Instead of trying to define the problem, as how the cognitive-systemic mediator would have done, the mediator tried to start the mediation process with a story about the parties' friendship. This is an alternative way of developing a context. The parties have come to mediation, and consequently the mediator has assumed that they would like to keep the friendship intact. However, the friendship is now strained due to doubt of one another's intentions. Rather than asking about their problem, the mediator asks about their hope for this mediation. The mediator does not ask about the parties'

needs or wants, and the parties react to the mediator's opening by reflecting about their hopes and not reflecting on their wants or needs. The mode of this opening invites the parties to tell their story from a subjective position within the individual party's universe. The opening sets the tone and problems that come up later are regarded as obstacles for the expressed hopes. To realise these hopes becomes a central focus of the dialogue, rather than the problem solving.

The problems become externalised when the mediator invites the parties to fill their position in the story about their friendship. The mediator does not pretend to be neutral²⁴⁶ (but, of course, impartial), and he is aware that he gives preferential treatment to what fits best with the alternative story and not what would fit best with the party's place in the problem story.

Still, after the opening, the parties refer to their place in the conflict story. Marlene talks from a place in the story of motherhood and a mother's natural rights. Dennis is talking from a place in the history of the broken agreement. It is an incompatible difference between the emotions and perspectives, among other things, in these stories, which are subject to negotiation. The narrative mediator's task is to create a place in the alternative story about friendship for the themes or stories which, for the moment, are ignored due to the fact that the dominating conflict stories take up so much space.

But first, the parties' story had to be explored. The mediator chooses to give the floor to Marlene first. He assesses that there are larger opportunities in her story about pregnancy and giving birth to get closer to the alternative story than in Dennis' story about broken agreements. The mediator tries to step into Marlene's viewpoint in her subjective universe by getting a reaction to Dennis' use of the word "catalyst." The story about catalysts created subjective difficulties for Marlene to place herself in that mindset, even in her life when the original agreement was made, and that made her reaction to the word "catalyst" more understandable. This visit to Marlene's subjective world makes Marlene talk from another place with other experiences and feelings.

²⁴⁶ In this connection neutral is to have no interest in a certain outcome, while impartial is not take sides.

- 26 Mediator Dennis used the word catalyst before ... like he described the original understanding as being that you would be like a catalyst for them ... for Dennis and Mario to have a child ... how did that fit with your understanding of what the agreement was to start with ... how does that word fit ?
- 27 Marlene Now I just think it's horrible but at the time but I guess at the beginning I was wrapped up in my own career and I didn't even see a child in my future ... so I didn't mind ... I wasn't in a relationship and I saw how committed him and Mario were so I ... I didn't think there would be any harm in allowing you know two great men to raise a child so I don't want to describe myself as a catalyst but as ... the means to the end ... if I was able to provide them what they needed that they couldn't provide for themselves then at that time I didn't think it was a problem ... however ... it's all changed ... I didn't think it was going to change.

When Dennis again takes the floor, he reacts to Marlene's resistance to the catalyst story by reformulating it and moving away from his place in the story about the broken agreement.

- 28 Dennis I used the term catalyst and it may sound cold but ... I came to the realisation that ... this relationship was not working (Mediator: Yes.) ... I trusted her ... we spent a lot of time together ... I ... I moved on ... I'm very happy in my relationship now ... I ... she is right when she says that we did have a strong friendship ... yes and I still value that friendship that's why I went to her instead of a person I didn't know I went to a person I did know and did trust and did believe in ...

This example shows the effect of the mediator's disturbance (see page ...) of the direction that was a consequence of objective use of language. Dennis now speaks from a place in the story of friendship, both in relation to Marlene and to Mario. Through such small changes, a new dimension of friendship is created. The mediator's microskills make sure that Dennis spoke from a place in his subjective story about Marlene. The mediator hopes that these changes will bring the parties closer to the realisation of the hopes that they expressed earlier in the mediation.

Despite the fact that Dennis and Marlene are no longer married, they are still friends and the mediator gets the impression that they would like to keep that friendship. But, the friendship is threatened by the conflict stories.