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PERSPECTIVE

Time, energy, and the use of traditional Japanese tea ceremonies for resolving disputes

By Devin C. Tucker

While attending Lauren Wood's Women in Trial Travel Summit conference a couple of weeks ago, I was moved by attorney Twila S. White's presentation on Mock Voir Dire. It was not the topic or what she was saying, it was her intentional, slow, deliberate, calm, and inviting speech that captivated the entire room of over 150 individuals. Twila centered herself and connected with everyone in the room. She didn't start with an opening, agenda, or objective. She took us on a journey. She made us feel comfortable. She gave us time and space to acclimate. And she deftly guided us to a safe environment where our vulnerability could be freely expressed.

Twila's powerful humility reminded me of a tea ceremony I attended at Shokoku-Ji, a famous temple of mediated peace from ancient Japan adjacent to the Japan International Mediation Center (JIMC), in Kyoto, Japan.

At a traditional tea ceremony, the tea master shared the history of tea ceremonies, the critical role of a tea master, and how the tea master's intentional, slow, deliberate, calm, and inciting presence helped foster peace between warring samurai clans.

The history

The traditional Japanese tea ceremony springs from the samurai period and was shared by Chinese



Pictured at right, Devin Tucker learns how to conduct a Japanese tea ceremony | Photo courtesy of Devin Tucker

Buddhist monks in hopes of dealing with the rising conflicts of the era. During this time, samurai leaders would schedule meetings with opposing samurai clans to discuss and resolve disputes. The tea ceremony was cultivated to be used as the meeting place for meaningful discussions to occur between leaders.

The structure

Traditional tea houses are constructed in an architectural design that forces guests of all ranks to humbly bend and crawl on their knees to enter a small, low square opening – too small to enter with swords. Guests from opposing clans sit across from each other while

awaiting the tea master. The tea master enters from another entrance and brings the tea kettle, bowls, matcha powder, hot water and other utensils. The tea rooms and entryways physically represent the Zen concepts of inner and outer worlds. For example, when entering the tea house, you are

physically and symbolically leaving the “outside” world and entering the “inner” world of the present. The philosophy behind this is to create a space to resolve. Not to argue or refute. The tea master or mediation neutral has no stake in the fight. The tea master’s role is to create a setting that allows the guests to be completely present and open to being vulnerable.

The master

In Japan it takes approximately 20 years to become a tea master. Traditionally, schoolchildren have the option to begin their tea master training as early as elementary school. Those seeking this path spend immense time and effort on the philosophy and methods of being a well-trained tea master. Aside from the practical and procedural steps of the ceremony, the most important thing for a master-in-training is understanding her power and her role as a master. This is also true for a mediator. Like a mediator, the master must learn how to create the time and space to open opposing sides to carefully contemplate and appreciate the present, to step from their “outside” world unto an “inner” world of mutual vulnerability and promise. They learn, as Twila demonstrated, the art of humbly modeling and including a reciprocal appreciation of time and energy that brings people together.

The guests

The tea ceremony takes two to six hours to complete and involves

over 15 steps combined with statements, questions, moments of silence, and languid movements. The tea master intentionally creates extra slow movements and steps to ensure stillness, calmness, and attention to being present. Each movement is carefully executed to move the session forward. The tea master’s movements create a space of peace and diplomacy. As you can imagine, even the most untamed samurai would feel uncomfortable disrupting and disrespecting a tea master’s careful preparation of every second devoted to making tea. Throughout this agreed-upon ritual, particular phrases and expressions are employed, including requests made to the tea master that extend beyond the realm of tea preparation or consumption. Instead, it asks for the honor of the tea master to bless the beginning of their meeting or to bless them by going their separate ways. Common forms of “please” and “thank you” are not used. Instead, phrases displaying honor and civility are the norm. For example, “Otemae chodai itashimasu,” is a very formal and respectful way of saying “my deepest appreciation for the honor of having you make tea for me.” As you can see, it is more about thanking the master for intentionally making tea just for them at this time. Also, there is a saying the tea master may say before serving tea, “ichi go ichi e,” which means “one chance, one opportunity.” This underscores the idea of creating a space and being present

for a positive and forward movement right now. I was particularly intrigued by the ritual of asking the tea master if it is okay to drink and if it is okay to finish their tea. Because the master spent so much time and effort preparing the tea, guests must ask to start and finish. It is not until the tea master has concluded all the steps and customary statements that the tea ceremony concludes. The guests must also make closing statements to the other guests thanking them for being present. Again and again, the focus is on appreciating this temporal and opportune moment in time when we are all together and can make a difference.

The result

This experience taught me the true art of mediation: to be like the tea master—to be intentional, to take time, and to give guests the time and space to reflect upon and appreciate the special moment. When done right, as in most tea ceremonies, the parties cannot help but mirror the humility and civility demonstrated by the tea master/mediator.

My takeaways are that:

- Energy is always exchanged and transferred. We have the power to cultivate and instill in others an energy that is secure, safe, comfortable, and entrusting.
- Energy is reciprocal. The energy we exude to clients, peers, or even opposing parties is the energy we receive back to us.
- Timing is everything. Collaboration requires the time and space for mutual reflection, vulnerability,

and an appreciation of this fleeting unique moment in time.

- You can never control the exact outcome, but you can control the space you create for yourself and others.
- We must continue to develop our practice and art further to continue learning and evolving from others and life experiences.
- No matter how complex the legal issue, it’s always matters of the heart that will seal or break a deal. Being in touch with others’ emotions and attachments to problems is the most significant indicator of how to best resolve a matter.

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