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IDENTITY

Stories of Selfhood in Coaching

Editor: Sam Chambers



Studies in Coaching

IDENTITY:
STORIES OF SELFHOOD IN COACHING

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Author Biographies | **iv**

Foreword | **Nick Bolton ix**

Exposing Illusion and Empowering Choice | **Olivia D’Silva 1**

The Soul of the Wood Emerges with Love | **Libby Davy 13**

Shape-shifting | **Maria-Katharina Richters 25**

Identity Shift or Journey of Self? | **Maggie Campbell 35**

Who We Are | **Emma Dempsey 45**

Identity: Is it Truly a Healthy and Realistic Concept? |
Carole Douillot 51

How to Identify ‘Identity’ in Coaching | **Fawzia Bheekhun 59**

WHEN EVERYTHING BELONGS - From Inner War
to a Friendly Universe | **Nick Thorpe 68**

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

OLIVIA D'SILVA

Olivia is a life coach and a writer who helps people to claim their sense of belonging at work and in the world. She has developed a unique approach to working with self-doubt, which transforms it into a powerful and motivating force leading to creative, collaborative and intuitive outcomes.

With an unfailing belief in human potential and commitment to growth, she has a practical and relatable approach to working with spiritual concepts. As well as working with individuals, she works in organisations to facilitate cultures of belonging for inclusion.

Her first book; *Your Whole Life Economy – Recognise Your True Value and Improve Your Quality of Life* was published in January 2018. Her second book; *The Purpose of Self-Doubt* is due for publication in Spring 2020.

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LIBBY DAVY

BA (Hons), PGCert (London), DipCoach, FRSA
Co-founder, Coaches for Climate Emergency (was XR)
Certified Facilitator, 2030 SDGs Game
Co-founder, The Regeneration

Libby has many identities evolving: human, coach, mentor, activist, facilitator, entrepreneur, public speaker, writer, mother, sex-positive enthusiast.

Clients range from coaches to change agents, parents to paradigm-shifting leaders in community, media, government and business - locally and globally.

She is regarded as an earthy, dynamic, systems-thinker who helps clients and systems get reconnected to self, other and earth - aligned, flowing and growing.

Her project "Planet Me" brings coaching and a systems approach to regeneration, in the face of existential threats like climate.

Spiritual life came naturally; Libby is one of four generations who have practised Buddhism, with over a decade's formal training herself. She is passionate about education and creativity, and has designed programmes and experiences for all ages.

Libby's networks mobilise social, economic and environmental impact at small or large scale. Join her, and help design and create the future you want to see, compassionately.

www.humanbells.com

MARIA-KATHARINA RICHTERS

Maria-Katharina Richters is an Animas trained and qualified ICF ACC accredited transformational art coach, an Animas coach mentor and speaker. Her background is in art and design having been a fashion designer and current DJ.

In her coaching practice 'Art of You', Maria specialises in helping people regain their self-belief through creativity, and free themselves from non-serving past identities and happenings to gift themselves the courage to access their inner wisdom to be what and who they truly want to be.

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Combining love with art therapy tools and creative exercises, her clients learn to put their spirit consciousness into all areas of their lives enhancing creative flow and idea creation, while serving them to deepen their relationship with themselves and their reality.

Maria grew up multilingual and multicultural having spent time living in Spain, England and Germany and is presently living in Hamburg, working as an online coach and art therapist on 1-1 and group basis and has recently launched her 'Awaken your Creativity' Coaching Program and customised packages.

www.art-of-you.com/

MAGGIE CAMPBELL

As a mother of three (teens to adults), Maggie has first-hand experience of juggling family life alongside demanding careers. Having managed diverse workforces, Maggie is well-versed in the world of Health and HR, including planning around maternity/paternity leave, health and wellness, leadership, and recruitment and retention. Her own company, established in 2013, focuses on coaching individuals to overcome obstacles and move forward with confidence to get what they want out of life. She also works alongside companies to bring their health, wellness and recruitment and retention strategies to life.

Maggie is a registered nurse and midwife, with a BSC (Hons) in Health Studies, and diplomas in child and adolescent psychology, child and adolescent nutrition, CBT and NLP.

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EMMA DEMPSEY

Emma Dempsey has worked in development for over twenty years, facilitating change in people and communities. Emma is a trainer at Animas in Edinburgh and is founder of Forth Coaching. Emma now works with “brilliant humans” looking to create change in their life and business.

www.forthcoaching.com

CAROLE DOUILLOT

After years of teaching French and being a progress coach in a sixth form college, Carole’s passion for psychology and young people led her to become a life coach. She spends her time offering one to one and group coaching, volunteering, writing, mentoring and running workshops and events. Carole loves working on several projects at a time especially in the education sector where she feels coaching can have a great impact.

With her clients, she likes going deep, and empowers them to go out of their comfort zone. Carole’s strengths lie in her ability to really understand her clients and helping them see things with more clarity. She is a certified transformational life coach, youth coach, group coach, positive psychology coach and existential coach that has worked with students, business owners and individuals from various academic fields. Carole’s interest in neuroscience and integrative practices also inspired her to train as a somatic coach allowing her to coach the client as a whole.

www.cdcoaching.co.uk

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FAWZIA BHEEKHUN

Fawzia Bheekhun is a qualified integrative psychotherapist working with trauma to enable a safe, calm space for recovery, human connection and healing. With over 12 years experience in psychotherapy, she is a leading authority in the field of gender sensitivity. Fawzia is the founder of company 'Emotional Wellbeing' through which she provides psychotherapy, coaching services and workshops.

Fawzia is also a transformational life coach that is passionate about supporting trainee and qualified psychotherapists to improve their clinical and consultative case management skills, exploring how they can be the best that they can be in their professional career, whilst maintaining a high ethical standard of congruence in their work. Fawzia also has experience working with female asylum seekers as a project coordinator, using psychosocial holistic narrative therapy.

www.fawziabheekhun.com

NICK THORPE

Nick Thorpe is an award-winning writer, speaker, coach & Animas trainer. A prolific journalist for more than 20 years, he is the author of three books of travel/self-discovery ranging from an expedition to Easter Island by experimental reed raft – *Eight Men and a Duck* - to his boat-hitching odyssey *Adrift in Caledonia*, later serialised as BBC Radio 4's Book of the Week. In more recent talks for TEDx and third sector he has focused on involved fatherhood, meaningful risk and gender equality. A keen kayaker and spiritual searcher, he lives by the sea in Edinburgh, where he often coaches clients in midlife transition.

www.nickthorpe.co.uk

FOREWORD

Nick Bolton

At its essence, transformational coaching is about identity.

Transformational coaching seeks to help unfold and bring in to light the tightly compressed mix of beliefs, values, assumptions, patterns, meaning-making and more that go to make up that person's sense of self.

Yet what's clear is that we all hold the notion of self and identity in different ways. For some, identity is fixed and immutable - "it's just the way I am" - for others, it's fluid, malleable and unknowable - "this is me right now but who knows who I am tomorrow!" And somewhere between these extremes, exist the majority of people who have a sense of stable self-hood with some core values and beliefs and a range of more changeable qualities.

For some, self and identity is fundamentally relational - ask them who they are, and they'll say they're a mother, father, husband, sister. For others, identity is their role - they're a senior executive, a nurse, a writer. I think of that great scene from "There Will Be Blood" on which Daniel Day-Lewis, as Daniel Plainview, states simply "I'm an oil man!" and this simple, bold statement defines him. Others again, identify themselves through the first this, then that, then the other progression of a narrative.

There is no one way to hold one's identity yet how we do so begins to affect the way we live, how we see the world and how we see ourselves in it.

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What better endeavour for a coach than to help someone unpick this self-concept and open new possibilities for being.

I'm delighted, then, to share the short books of coaching stories, or perhaps better called case-studies, of how coaches trained through our school have worked with identity to create new awareness and change in the lives of their clients.

I always admire the courage and openness of our coaches who share their journeys and I hope you enjoy diving in to their world for a brief moment.

EXPOSING ILLUSION AND EMPOWERING CHOICE

Olivia D'Silva

Old Me, New Me, Future Me

How do we define identity? I feel strongly that I know who I am. Yet when I attempt to define my identity what comes up is a heritage, some locations, a gender, occupations, perhaps some beliefs and practices with which I choose to align. But to what extent have I chosen these things and which of them has chosen me?

The further I attempt to define my identity, the more this list of words and phrases seems inadequate to encompass what it really means to be human, with a developing history and a shifting reality. The more I try to pin this down, the more the concept of my identity seems to dissipate into a Scotch Mist. Perhaps identity is only an illusion?

In this case study, an important turning point was the work in challenging a limiting belief that had been driving the client. And in the attempt to define the belief, how it appeared as an illusion. If such an indefinable concept can be such a strong driver in our lives, then why shouldn't we seek to choose what is driving us and in which direction?

Being able to choose which parts of her identity to align with and show up in the world have been crucial to this client. Coaching has helped her to explore these aspects of herself and empower her choices.

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The Client

This case study focuses on a 34-year-old professional woman who came to coaching after being on an isolated path of self-development, learning and growing through books and self-study. She is particularly drawn to the principles behind the Law of Attraction.

Through her self-study she recognised that from the ages of 11 through to 30, she had been suffering with varying levels of depression. In turn, she had become very familiar with all the coping mechanisms in her life. When she started to read about positive thinking and affirmations, she realised that it's all about mindset and that she could find her way out.

She proceeded to put this theory into practice, and worked hard at checking her beliefs and focusing on positive thinking so that it is now more natural for her.

During our first session, she announced in a powerful, solid and confident way: "I now know that I will never have depression again." I remember being struck by the force behind this statement. I believe I felt the power of positive thinking in action. I was particularly excited about the potential benefits of bringing this energy into the coaching relationship.

The Challenge

Primarily the coaching was required to support the client's continued exploration and growth into this new way of life.

Recognising herself as an empath, sensitive to the emotions of others, she often found herself drained by people. Therefore, she had found it necessary to close herself off emotionally to work on developing her new self.

Now she was feeling ready to start letting people back in, but it was important to do this in a way that wouldn't cause her to lose herself. She talked about the importance of being able to recognise and express her emotions in the moment, rather than allowing them to build.

She talked about feeling like 'Bambi' when expressing her needs and being assertive. When I asked her what this meant, she described a newborn animal being all shaky getting to its feet. This is how she felt bringing her new self into the world. She was on an emotional rollercoaster and often felt like she didn't know what to do.

She talked about how she would like to find her purpose and to develop a vision of how she wants her life to be. She had a strong sense that she is meant to be doing something worthwhile.

In starting to explore, she soon apologised for rambling and going all over the place. I gave permission to express whatever came to her and assured her that we would make sense of it all as we went along.

For the purpose of clarity and ease of reading, I have paraphrased conversations. However, in honour of the coaching relationship, I have used the client's own words as much as possible.

Starting Point

I asked the client if she had a sense of where to start our exploration. She talked about barriers that had been stopping her from achieving her potential and working to her capabilities. These were beliefs that were limiting her and preventing her from being all that she could be.

She talked about being motivated by the fear of failure. When she was younger, she didn't feel this fear, but she remembers a constant striving to be the best. As she grew older, she started to worry about failure, and this made her lower her expectations of herself, achieving less but still feeling like a failure.

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She had done some work on forgiveness, writing pages and pages of stuff from the past that she hadn't realised was still in there and weighing her down. I sensed her confusion as she talked about having taken on other people's feelings, and not knowing which ones actually belonged to her. She felt that forgiveness would be hard but thought it could be the way forward.

As part of my contracting process, I explain that coaching is about the here and now and the way forward. Nothing is off limits, and clients often find themselves sharing things that they've never spoken about before; however I will normally aim to bring the focus into the present.

When she was talking through forgiveness, I felt heaviness from her. I had an intuitive sense that because she had already spent much time dealing with her past, there may be another way of looking at things.

I gained permission to offer this and upon agreement I posed the question: "How would it feel to work on acceptance rather than forgiveness?"

There was an instant lightening in the air. She embraced this concept and said that to feel like she could accept herself would be 'amazing'.

The Process

We began to explore her new self and how we could bring this into the world. The energy brought into the sessions was always enthusiastic; she enjoyed each exercise and was open to finding a new way to look at things.

"If I am not the best, I have failed"

The fear of failure surfaced again after a couple of sessions. She recognised that a key component of bringing her new self to the world was "...getting better at internal confirmation of my worth." If she could

get better at confirming her own worth, she would feel stronger and consequently would not need this from other people.

We explored this confirmation. I asked her: “What kind of confirmation is that confirmation?”

This simple, clean question was enough for her to make a full examination.

“Confirmation that I am enough. That I am providing things to people and the world that make a difference.”

Without prompt, she proceeded to explore the roots of this feeling and traced it back to her childhood, when she was very driven at school. She was intelligent and often top of the class. However, this position was lost when she moved to grammar school and found that she wasn't accepted into the sports teams (because they were already winning) and there were many other children “...way more intelligent than me.” She immediately lost her sense of self-worth and “never figured out a way to be ok with not being the best.” Consequently, she couldn't accept being ‘mediocre’ as this felt like she had failed.

We reflected upon this information from the perspective of her adult self. She recognised this as the crux of her negative self-talk. She recognised the pressure that she had put on herself in carrying the belief: “If I'm not the best, I've failed.

“How could I ever live up to that?”

“No wonder I hated myself...”

EMPOWERING THE BELIEF

We explored the belief. It was most apparent in her work and personal relationships. She had high expectations of herself but her expectations of others were low. This would lead to her picking up responsibility for other people, leaving her feeling unappreciated and drained.

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We talked through the consequences of holding onto this belief. She recognised that in striving to be the best at everything, she was preventing herself from being the best at anything. If she wanted to be the best at something, it would take commitment and focus. She reflected upon the performance of an Olympic athlete who only concentrates on their particular area. She likes lots of variety in her life and therefore being the best at all these things is completely unachievable.

We talked about the payoff of holding onto this belief, or how it may be protecting her. She recognised that in not allowing herself to reach her potential, she was protecting herself from getting to that place, and then still feeling like a failure.

This was quite a realisation, because she is now starting to get the things she wants in her career. However, she is often left feeling overwhelmed, concerned and upset. She is worried that if she becomes successful, she still may not be happy. Then she will know the problem is with her and that she may never be happy. She has a fear of getting depression again and predicts that she could end up feeling bad for the rest of her life.

We disputed the belief by looking at the tangible consequences in her life from the times when she felt like she had failed. She couldn't identify anything tangible other than beating herself up with unrealistic expectations; she had never lost a job or anything like that.

When we started to define 'The Best', she began to feel the irrationality of it. She recognised that the best on one day could mean something different the next. When trying to apply rational thought, there seemed nothing to define. She could feel the notion of 'the best' slipping away like the Scotch Mist.

Now that the illusion was apparent, we began to exchange the belief. Instead of being the best, she felt like it was achievable to aim to be the best that she can be. She recognised the necessity of being kind to herself and accepting her humanness.

Instead of expecting to be the best, she embraced the notion of practising, which seemed more practical and achievable. After all, how does someone become the best at something? They practise.

So, if something doesn't go according to plan the first time, she would affirm: "It's ok, we're practising and that's all part of getting it right."

We talked about how this new belief might operate in her life. She identified a trigger in feeling judged by others in the workplace for not having done something perfectly. She can see this differently now. If she feels judged by someone, they are probably misplacing their own feelings of perfection or inadequacy.

She developed this into a game. When she feels judged by someone, she will say to herself, "I accept your challenge." Then she will congratulate herself for responding differently, and recognise that practising is an important part of getting it right.

We discussed how this strategy could bring her expectation of herself into line with what she expects from everyone else. She realised that she had always sought to play down her abilities so as not to make other people feel uncomfortable. Being taller than a lot of people, she always sought to find a lower position so as not to intimidate others.

I was struck by a Marianne Williamson quote, which I offered to her:

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate, our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure."

STEPPING INTO "NEW ME"

We continued to monitor how she was showing up in the world with her new self. There were some successes in the workplace and some challenges. At one point, she recognised having "one foot in the old - frustrating things that don't work for me, and one foot in the new - things that do work for me." This was causing her to feel like she was on an emotional rollercoaster, experiencing big mood swings.

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She described this: “the Old Me position always worries what people think of me. Old Me views every event from others’ perspectives as a reflection on my worth. Everything that happens I always measure against how worthy they think I am. My reaction to this was always inward. I am starting to react outward but I’m still not where I need to be.” She expressed a desire to stop judging herself and to step back, see things objectively and not always as her fault.

We carried out a Perceptual Positions exercise, which is designed to enable a client to explore perspectives of their worldview. The exercise involves the client stepping into different positions in turn.

Firstly, she assumed the position of Old Me. I asked her to describe her body language and how it felt to be in this position.

“My shoulders are heavy and slumped. I am making myself smaller and inoffensive.”

I asked her if any phrases come to mind.

“I don’t know. I can’t make decisions, I don’t know what to do. I can’t. This is too much. When will this end? Why me? Everything is always up to me. No one ever helps. I’m not good enough. I feel alone. Not living up to potential – failure. I can’t take any more. I need a rest. I need sleep. Lots and lots of sleep. It’s about... having to get through things, using all my energy to get through things rather than being inspired and motivated to get things done. Unfair.”

“No wonder I used to feel like shit...”

I asked her to imagine that New Me was in her presence and if there was anything she wanted to say.

“This way hasn’t worked, we need to find a new way. I don’t want to feel like this anymore.”

She then felt her way into the position of New Me and described her body language and feelings.

“Open, tall, wide, shoulders back. Unafraid. No barriers. Playful. Hopeful. Expectant, excited, experimental, let go, enjoy. New people. Lots of people; enjoying lots of people. Waterproof... when things come in instead of latching on they wash off and don't affect me. Endless possibilities and therefore achievement of potential. Happy. Objective.”

NEW ME PHRASES:

“I'll give it a go. Let's see what happens. Something good will come of this. How can I make this better? I'm getting what I deserve. No matter what other people think, I know I'm worthy. I'm confident in my convictions. I can express what I need and want. Non-judgemental of myself and others and accepting of situations.”

Is there anything that New Me would like to say to Old Me?

“It will all be all right. Stop judging yourself and letting it wear you down. Then you will be lighter and you can fly.”

The third position in the exercise is one of an objective observer who has witnessed the interaction. I asked her if she would like to step into this role.

She imagined herself as an Angel watching over.

Without any prompting, she described her feelings from this position:

“I am feeling love towards the Old Me, so worn down. I know from here that everything will be alright and I am alright. Old Me is the opposite of waterproof – like a manky old sponge, heavy and bedraggled. I am feeling love for how much good I can bring to myself and others now because I am free.”

She embraced both aspects of herself and reflected on our talk of acceptance in the first session. She feels she has achieved this now.

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“I’d used my life story as a way of defining how I would react to things and who I am. You can be whoever you want to be, whenever you want to be rather than having to be like that. The way you have come to be at the point where you are now doesn’t define who you are. It may have caused what happened but it doesn’t define you. All the things that happen don’t define who you are, except that it’s happened – YOU are bigger than that.”

“I can now accept and feel loving towards what has happened – I don’t have to take it all forward. Like when packing for a trip, I don’t have to take all the old clothes that don’t fit me anymore – I can buy new clothes because they are nice and they suit the journey.”

She considered a strategy to bring into her life when she is caught in the space between Old Me and New Me. She can take a moment to ask herself, “What would the sponge do and what would the umbrella do?” She can be the Angel and ask herself: “What would Old Me think, what would they do? What would New Me think and do?”

Testing

Over the next few sessions, we reflected upon situations at work and in the family. New Me had developed a different coping strategy to deal with stressful situations. She was learning to stand back and let others take responsibility rather than jumping in to make sure everything got done. At times, she would question whether or not she was doing her job. She would find herself struggling to step back, but once she allowed things to unfold she found that satisfactory outcomes would emerge.

Situations occurred whereby she had to express her emotions and ask for needs to be met. She is beginning to be able to understand and express her emotions quicker. Although the new way is often still a challenge, she feels like she knows what to do. She recognises that the more she responds in the new way, the more natural it will become.

There were even times when she would choose to act like Old Me; to take responsibility rather than allowing others. But we recognised that in coping with these situations, she was doing this from a New Me position.

The Outcome

To finish off the work, we came back to the place of exploring her purpose in life.

THE GIFT

I asked her if she thought she may have a gift to offer the world and what that might be. At first there was some resistance to the concept of having a gift, but she kept an open mind and proceeded to explore.

She reflected upon how people always seem to open up to her and what this means. She recognised that she has an ability to pick up on others' feelings and needs, and is able to respond by putting them at ease. She is good at conflict resolution and making people feel safe. She can frame information in a way that is simple and clear for people to understand.

She exclaimed that she couldn't understand the contribution or use of this ability.

I had trouble hiding my surprise at this statement! I reflected this back to her in the hope that she could hear it in a different way.

We explored her not understanding the contribution and use of her ability. It became apparent that she believed this because there was no tangible measure of the results, like there was at grammar school. However, she recognised that her goals are very different now, and we explored other ways she could measure the results, such as monitoring her feelings and counting the connections made with other people.

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THE VISION

Next, we worked on developing a vision for how she wants her future self to be.

We approached this through a series of testimonial exercises to her future self on different aspects of her life. From these testimonials, she developed a personal mission statement. This came from a deep and instinctual place and is something that will be a reminder of what she has to offer. The statement will keep her motivated and moving forward into the future self that she has envisioned.

“I have lived to tell the tale and now I light the way for others. I am everything, all at once and separately. I am a tornado that multiplies experiences to make something bigger, more profound, more effective, more enjoyable and more whole. When I reach a new layer of the onion, I bravely venture through it with conscious understanding.”

It feels like Bambi is evolving into the Alpha Doe.

I am continually inspired by my clients. It is a privilege to take up this intimate role in the life of another and witness the transformation that happens when realisations and recognitions are met with courage.

On the subject of identity, I'm going to close using the client's own words:

“The way you have come to be at the point where you are now doesn't define who you are. It may have caused what happened but it doesn't define you. All the things that happen don't define who you are, accept that it's happened – YOU are bigger than that.”

THE SOUL OF THE WOOD EMERGES WITH LOVE

Libby Davy

Love. It's a big word and a vast topic. What do we even mean by it, and how might it connect to identity?

This book is all about identity. If you feel very clear about who you are right now, remember that coaching does not have to focus on identity; there are many other lenses we look through. But remember also, identity is not static either, and the more convinced we are that we know exactly who we are, the more tightly we might be holding that story, blocking the unfolding of the new self, which is constantly changing, like everything.

Coaching is essentially all about empowering clients to be and become the fullest expression of themselves they can. *"It enables a person, group, or team to move from where they are to where they want to be, through a process of exploration and action."* - Nick Bolton

As a purpose-led coach and facilitator inspired by social and environmental progress, I seek out compassionate individuals and organisations. Those I offer to work with all have at least one thing in common: the potential to multiply love in their world. I call them 'Human Bells' and I help them resonate and ring true as their fresh new self or 'isness' emerges.

Thinking this is a fluffy thing? Not at all. It takes courage, grit and insight to be the change, to have hope of things becoming better, to name feelings, needs and thoughts. A thought becomes a behaviour, then a habit, then a lifetime. Every step of the way we make fresh choices, again and again, forgiving ourselves and others, letting go

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and learning to grow on the spiral path upwards. Many of us want to do that to help others, not just ourselves.

As my fellow Australian, Baz Luhrmann, invoked in *Strictly Ballroom*, “A life lived in fear is a life half lived.” So if life boils down to one binary question, perhaps it is this: what will you choose – love or fear? I choose love, and so did Nicola, who I will be introducing soon. My hope is that you will too.

Together in coaching, we bring compassionate presence to your stories and learn to garden the conditions of life to allow the best possible future to emerge. People come wanting to shape their own world and end up realising how interconnected everything is. What affects each of us, in some way affects all of us. Perhaps that’s the true meaning of fractal coaching. It’s not just you that benefits, everyone around you does – present and future, and all who sail upon you.

With macro and micro lenses, we zoom in and out to see where you sit on this spinning ball of moments, creating time and space to be truly present to what wants to be born. As Dr Catherine Vulliamy, a recent client, said: “This feels like what the Maori wood-carvers do: you’re helping the ‘soul of my wood’ emerge.”

However beautiful and evocative that metaphor may be, it is still incomplete. The wood learns to carve itself, as we help it find its own soul. The clients become both wood and carver. I hold their hands as they become confident with the awareness required to direct the tools of mind, body, spirit and community. Connection to self/earth/others all comes into play in helping be reflected back as the person they are truly being and becoming. Their whole organism learns to become alert to, and honouring of, their own experience, and how this plays out moment to moment in the ever-changing world around them.

A bit cosmic? Maybe, and still very practical, safe and grounded in the latest findings in cognitive psychology, ancient spiritual practices, organisational learning and human development. The Animas Learning Tree at bottom of my home page describes this visually.

A New Identity

The result of effective transformational coaching is nothing less than a new identity, a new self that emerges over just a few months initially, and beyond, into all the years ahead. Further coaching is often useful when blocks occur, a point of integration arises or a shift in identity is being felt.

The story of who you are is always evolving. Together we turn the page and fill in the blanks, drawing on the backstory but not being limited by it. Unlike in therapy, we spend most of our time in the present and the future, not the past. In my case, coaching helps us write the most compassionate, empowering story we can.

“Each friend represents a world in us, a world possibly not born until they arrive, and it is only by this meeting that a new world is born.”
– Anaïs Nin

Buddhism, one potent source of inspiration, teaches us not to be too attached to our old self in order to let the new self keep emerging. Embracing paradox we realise there is a self, but if we try and pin it down as a fixed thing, we realise there is no self actually there in our direct experience. Both things are true, and I love to blame Descartes for the whole right/wrong, black/white, male/female false dichotomy. The reality is far more beautiful and kaleidoscopic. We are not one thing, we are many, and the more lightly we hold our stories about our self, the more they can evolve.

My supervisor, Hetty Einzig, author of *The Future of Coaching* (Routledge), and many others I’m informed by like Carl Jung, Carl Rogers, Roberto Assagioli, Joanna Macy and Rupert Sheldrake, talk about concepts like murmuring swarms, hive minds and biomorphic resonance. The focus shifts from who am I as a separate self at this moment in time, to how am I interdependently co-arising with everyone and everything around me. When we feel the reality of that connection (think butterfly effect and chaos theory) what happens in

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Rwanda starts to come into stronger focus. What affects you, affects me. It's all connected. Confused? Go watch *Avatar* or *The Matrix* and come back to me. Love to hear your recommendations too.

Kiss the Joy as it Flies

So then imagine the power of realising we are not our thoughts and that whatever we are experiencing, this too shall pass. Also imagine how we can learn to shape our thoughts with the coach we are best suited to being with.

Now that's where it gets really transformative and cosmic.

What's Love Got to Do with It?

"Love one another and you will be happy, it is as simple and as difficult as that. There is no other way." – Michael Leunig

Usually we think of romantic love, but when we stop and ponder even for a moment, we realise 'Love' is a many-splendoured thing. The Greeks talked about different forms of love: **agápe** – love of humanity, **philia** – friendship, **pragma** – enduring love, **éros** – romantic love, **storge** – parent/child or family love and even **ludus** – playful love or flirting. Imagine a life with all of that!

Buddhists talk about **mettā** or loving kindness and much of Buddhism, particularly Tibetan Buddhism, can be seen to focus on the cultivation of **mettā** as the entire purpose of life, without which nothing else of any positive substance can arise. **Mettā** is vastly different to **éros**, for example. More like unconditional love for all beings. The feeling might be very fleeting but we can learn to know it exists, and that in itself is truly transformational. Right action is preceded by right thought, which is preceded by right mind. When we reside in the possibility of **mettā**, as best we can, all else flows. We cannot control the outcome but we can influence the intention and some of the conditions. We

can just experiment and see. The more we learn who we are and the nature of mind, the clearer it all becomes. It's a big topic and the path of a lifetime that countless before us have trod and can show the way.

So if we just love others enough everything will be okay? No, Leunig's words were incomplete. What's missing then?

Self Love

A meditation practice called the mettā bhavana teaches us to cultivate loving kindness for ourselves and all beings, including those we struggle with. In the first stage we start by allowing mettā to flow towards ourselves. Not squeezing it out, or faking it, but noticing even the smallest evidence for its existence in memory and, ideally, in our direct experience. It is a felt sense we are looking to notice and cultivate. Then we turn towards a friend in the second stage, then a neutral person, a difficult person, then all together with equanimity, and all beings and perhaps even all that is! There are many variations and it can have a profound effect on the way you experience the world.

When I was learning to teach the mettā bhavana in the West, having practised it for over a decade, we were encouraged not to start with the self, as it has been taught for centuries in the East. My teachers had learnt that this would be so challenging for people in the room, that we started with a friend in stage one.

Sometimes I have to try hard to empathise and remember what intense self-loathing I had felt towards myself at times, and how crippling this is on a daily basis for so many. Thank goodness change is possible. Neuroplasticity and coaching have proven this. But it takes commitment and practice.

Pioneering Western Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg asked The Dalai Lama in 1990: "Your Holiness, what do you think about self-hatred?"

"What's that?" he answered.

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How would it be if we could all answer the same? Can you imagine what the world might look like if healthy self-love was a core part of human identity, including world leaders? If we legislated to create and protect it? If the media was held accountable for it, and self love was measured as part of Gross Domestic Happiness, just as Bhutan is doing, while global economists get inspired? Imagine how we might behave en masse if our human systems led to a stable sense of love for ourselves: how might we vote and share resources? Not the shadow side of narcissism, but a healthy sense of positive self regard. Of being 'enough', of being 'whole', rather than pouring limited resources into filling the gaping hole.

I have been evolving my practice around the causal pathways towards that utopian dream for over three decades, and distill it as best I can in coaching.

There are many resources available on the topic of self-compassion and [Dr Kristen Neff](#) is one of the foremost experts on the subject. You can test your [level of self compassion](#) on her website and see what's there for you.

Expressing Love

Expressing love can be as simple as making someone a cup of tea or signing a petition. Or it can be as big as starting a social enterprise, working for a charity, donating a large amount of your time, treasure or talent – or dedicating yourself to the care of others as a parent or coach. The possibilities are vast and unique to each person.

Yet so often expressing our care makes us wince and hide. Will it be good enough, shiny enough, done in just the right way? How will it compare? How will it be received? What can I do in the face of so much complexity? Exploring your personal interests and sphere of influence helps resolve this. The [Myer-Briggs](#) psychometric tool, [Enneagram](#) and the Japanese model of [Ikigai](#) ('reason for being') are part of the toolkit

we draw on, working skilfully with whatever is most useful for you at the time.

Our words and deeds have great power to lift someone's spirits and open us to each other. But attachment to an old self, cynicism, old wounds, can get in the way.

The people I coach begin with varying degrees and types of love alive in their lives. Some feel it for others, but not much for themselves. The common ingredient is they all value themselves enough to embark on a coaching journey once they find the right coach. During our partnership, we always end up focusing on the most important kind of all – **self-love**. From this flows all possibility, and it starts with simply being willing to listen to our needs and know we can meet at least some of them when we get clear about how to work with change.

Without the ability to see, honour and feed ourselves with real nourishment, we cannot sustainably help anyone else.

And what is a life without love? Surely a barren one indeed. But with hope, grace and courage, love will grow and flow – in one form or another.

Nicola's Story

Nicola came to me after burning out and receiving a promotion. She achieved great things in her role as events co-ordinator for an international women's charity, but at great personal cost to her adrenal system, like so many others. Now she was ready to take a good look at how she worked, and who she wanted to be as a leader in this next stage of growth.

The organisation helps rebuild communities in conflict zones, with funds invested in women's education, which is proven to help the whole society rise back up. Good men support them along the way; it's an excellent model. Now Nicola was being asked to grow

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into a more senior role, responsible for raising millions to affect the lives of thousands. Her impact would spread through societies and generations in places like Rwanda. It was no small task, but we were both energised by the opportunities ahead, despite clear challenges.

A promotion can often bring about a shift in identity, as can a redundancy, or any big change at work. Most of us spend the majority of our lives at work, so the person we are there affects the person we are throughout our life. The way we are reflected back through our relationships with clients and colleagues, particularly authority figures re-enacting the archetypes of 'Mother/ Father', reinforces existing scripts we are operating from. Psychodynamic, person-centred and gestalt among other approaches all support this view.

Nicola's work was very inspiring to both of us. While this made it compelling, it also carried a shadow we and many others experience – burn out. Anyone who has known the feeling of *'I'm not enough'* will know what I mean, especially if their work is meaningful to them and strongly resonant with their highest potential.

Overidentifying with the suffering of others we want to help, without turning towards our own suffering, is counterproductive as well. We can only grow as far as the oldest parts of ourselves are integrated into the emerging new whole. Sometimes we must turn towards that suffering with kind awareness to let it go. Sometimes we need help with that.

"If only I could try harder, do more, work more hours, be more effective, be smarter, help more people, if only I could be... more." But we can never do enough if we are coming from a scarcity script of *"I'm not enough."* We would be giving from an empty well, or in transactional analysis terms, a 'leaky stroke bucket'. No matter how much we achieve or how much praise we are given, it will fall out the bottom and we will be left scoured out.

Given my own history of burn out and feeling 'not enough' at times, I knew I needed to be careful of projection and countertransference. Her issues were not mine, but I could certainly empathise and learn more, which made the work all the more compelling. How could I help Nicola find her own answers to avoid experiencing the worst of what I had? How could I hold this work in compassionate awareness and not get too caught up in overservicing her? Keeping boundaries around time and email contact between sessions was but one way I found.

We both knew the education and development of women had a ripple effect well established in development studies. Indeed I had specifically researched and offered to work with this charity knowing that; I looked for this systemic impact multiplier in all my 'macro' clients.

When that core principle was applied to women in post-conflict zones, who had often been raped and seen their children and entire communities murdered, you can imagine the potential and challenge of the coaching process. Nicola had a huge heart and mind and was high potential. Understandably, she had worked beyond her previous capacity, helping raise over £1 million the year before. She was hugely proud of the team's achievements, but had, in her own words, "been giving from an empty well." Her boundaries were barely existent and her new identity was only a sketch to me at first.

Nicola had to upgrade her identity, in essence, to expand into her new role. The emphasis would be fully on Nicola, but there are of course two people in the room. Let's have a look at her coach then.

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Russian Dolls & Former Selves

In my early 20s, I too was a highly ambitious young woman wanting to change the world and be more than enough. That young woman is still in here, like the Russian Dolls I bring out to share with clients. All those younger selves still reside within us; as our identity emerges over time, we experience quite fundamental shifts. Adolescence is one, leaving home, a new job, a new child, a new country or community. Each time we go through this, our previous self is still there, but it changes. Sometimes the change is as radical as, say, a caterpillar into a butterfly, or stages in between. The Harry Enfield sketch on Youtube “Kevin becomes a teenager” is one hilarious example of this happening in rapid time.

I have undergone extensive training, therapy, coaching and meditation to enable me to both feel, understand and hold my own material to keep the coaching space ‘clean’ for my clients, but still resonant. I’ve learnt to ‘know myself’ well, shadow included. I rarely give advice, because it’s the client’s experience that matters, not mine, but there is certainly a dynamic at play between the two different but highly connected people in the space. It is, after all, a relational intervention and we are not robots programmed to deliver formulaic results.

In Nicola’s case, her employer was happy for her to spend her annual training budget on coaching, and has since been extremely pleased with their investment. Many clients fund their own coaching and in a way, it really doesn’t matter who pays as long as we seize the opportunity if we can.

The coaching agreement was for an initial three-month partnership, with check-in points at six and 12 months. We met fortnightly or monthly in six one-hour sessions in Central London and kept in touch via email and the Human Bells Facebook group in between. I was also able to share contacts from my extensive network and recommend books and other resources.

Unlike therapy we worked primarily in the present, moving forward. The past came up when relevant, but we did not linger there and I did not push her to go there. Although there is much crossover between the two ways of working, and many train in both, coaching comes from a paradigm of potential with a focus on possibility, not healing dysfunction, although that may be an outcome of the process.

We explored her relationships at work and home, her core values, hobbies and interests, about what filled her well and how she spent her time. There is much more that could be said about the process, but perhaps coaching is best experienced rather than described; it is intensely personal and never prescriptive. Self love was, as ever, a focus.

The New Nicola Is Carved

When I spoke to Nicola recently, I only wish I had a camera rolling. She had just returned from taking another group of donors to Rwanda. There had been a profound shift from the experience of previous journeys, which could be emotionally and physically quite gruelling. This time she was able to cry, when previously she felt she had to hold it all in and suffered for it, creating a chasm between her own self and others, all while maintaining her professional duties on tour.

“The work we did together completely changed my life. I learnt to fill my well, and to cultivate a semipermeable membrane to hold myself but still be present. I know what my core value is now and it’s empowerment. Of me, of women and men everywhere. I keep it close by at all times and it helps me make decisions daily.”

Being present to her own emotion meant she was able to be present with others on the journey, including major donors and survivors of genocide who need all the help we can give them to rebuild their society. Emotional connection can make or break a donor’s experience, as you might imagine. I’ve been invited to go with her to Rwanda this year and would love to see all of this in the field of relentless love, in action.

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Coaching Coaches

In my work with coaches, we also see this multiplier effect. As coaches we are the product, and so our investment in our own development has a direct impact on our own emerging identity and efficacy. Whether that is further training, supervision, time with peers, high quality coaching or perhaps most importantly, time to reflect – we notice ourselves evolve over time when we hold up the lens of learning to look at ourselves. We are also never a fixed thing. We are all constantly emerging.

You can hear more about all this in an interview I did with Robert Stephenson, CEO at Animas Centre for Coaching [here](#).

Wild Geese

During the first session with Nicola I chose a poem that fell straight into her heart, which she shared widely with friends and colleagues. "[Wild Geese](#)" by Mary Oliver. You can find it online in full. Enjoy a taste of its wings.

*"You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves."*

The Formula

(Hope + Love + Trust + Timing) - (Fear + Attachment to the Old Self) =
The New Self

SHAPE-SHIFTING

Maria-Katharina Richters

Identity is like shape-shifting.

It is a fluent, changeable thing. Identity is something that we either identify 'with' or 'as'. It is portrayed internally and expressed externally, but will always be received differently depending on the observer. Identity is not just your name, sex and date of birth, unless we limit it to these specific categories: it is much more than that. So what is identity?

I personally find that identity differs depending on what essence of You it is that you connect with.

We go through many stages in our lives in which we identify ourselves through different lenses, be it through imagination, or what we have been told and conditioned to identify with. Through our memories, true and false, through parents/family, friends and the environment or through culture and geography. Perhaps we identify ourselves through our own filters of the world that we have created through experiences, the reception of others, or through change of perspectives, paradigm shifts and different levels of consciousness, like the shedding skin of a snake, peeling off layers to get to a different, new and fresh identity... Additionally, I hold the belief that our astrological chart has a huge effect on what character traits or blueprint we are born with, which will determine how we respond and pick up on things, what our focus is on etc.

The thing about astrology is, it is an outward reflection of what is happening inside. When you know about it and understand the connections between the planets and our setup, you get a better understanding of what your lessons are in this life of yours. You know what to change and

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what challenges will arise, and how you will respond to these challenges. It adds clarity to your understanding of your patterns and behaviours, and explains why one person is affected by the same situation differently to another. And yet one layer deeper, there is only one true identity, and one counteracting identity within you. Your soul and your ego, constantly playing with one another. I would consider them individual forms of identity, but perhaps in different ways than one might expect to talk about identity. The two come together to create one identity, and looking at each of them on their own as two different polarities creates this idea of the shape-shifter. If you attempt to visualise this shapeshifting, the person all of a sudden turns into a form different from their usual state, similar to the reptilian process of shapeshifting. This serpentine comparison is perhaps one of the most common images of what shape-shifting tangibly looks like. However, I look at it metaphorically.

Imagine a moment when someone who is generally considered to have the 'sweetest' nature, all of a sudden lashes out with an outburst of anger and really hurts another by doing so. I would call this an example of shapeshifting. The same person unexpectedly became another version of themselves, even though they are the same individual. Something else comes over them, and they behave in a manner that can be described as 'unlike themselves' or 'out of character'. It's like two sides of one being living in the same body, shifting between two different states, both serving as different catalysts for a reaction to external situations. The reaction comes from one of two places: the first, a place of love, which might be expressed by showing understanding and empathy, and listening to others in a state of calmness and serenity. The second is a place of pain/fear that stems from feeling mistreated, or as if they need to claim their right or power back, or even from having feelings of hate or anger towards someone that they actually love. There's a strong sense of needing to protect themselves through force: there is no trust, and a strong rush of emotion just pulls one deeper into that feeling. It grows fast, and is usually connected to potential shouting, harsh words and/or hurting the other person either physically or emotionally.

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Every single one of us has these two sides. One side is driven by the soul, the desire that drives our physical human body, and that takes us through our life experiences with an inner knowing or gut instinct. It is the energy of wanting to love unconditionally and share with people. Then, there is the physical, animalistic side to us: the ego. This side is what makes sure we are reminded to eat, sleep, run or fight when we need to. It's the protector of the self. It wants to protect us from pain and is very self-centred, and its underlying energy is fear. This is part of what makes us human though, as without the ego we wouldn't feel sad or happy or have the material to think critically. It is a form of resistance to the ever-flowing, abundant life force that makes up our soul. It is attachment; it keeps the soul in our body. If we didn't have our ego, we wouldn't have anything to work with. So it is a pivotal part of us. Without it we wouldn't be walking on this earth right now, but hovering around other planes of light and spirits in other dimensions.

The reason I'm saying this is because our identity is influenced by these two forces. Whichever one we dedicate more energy to will affect our identity, and the way that we show up, in different ways. Coaching can be the catalyst for change that tunes in with your soul and your true heart's desire. It doesn't eliminate fear, but it overcomes it by gaining clarity and the power to look it straight in the eye within a coaching conversation. Coaching trains the muscles to seek out the truth voluntarily and overcome a habit of avoidance. The reason people seek coaching is because they have a desire to live fearlessly, eliminating baggage, lightening their load and living their true selves without apology or hesitation. People don't need coaching, as life naturally takes us through many situations, teaching many lessons without it. However, we do have the power within us to live smarter if we want to. Living smarter means understanding yourself so that you can make themes of it, while alleviating pressure.

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I have a client called Marcus who came to me for coaching in September 2017. He identified with my niche, which sits within the context of creativity; I coach creatives, e.g. visual artists, musicians, performers, writers, entrepreneurs and people wanting to get creative with their lives, wanting to live as their authentic selves. Being an artist himself, he felt drawn to me. He sought out coaching after he tried out counselling, and discovered he didn't really enjoy the process. He didn't find it useful to him personally, as it felt that conversations were lingering too much in the past without much action, planning or positivity coming from it at the end of the session, just a situation in which he left with heavy feelings. He is aware that he has strong eruptive energies within him that he feels he can't control sometimes. After therapy sessions he always felt low and as though they only added to him experiencing extreme highs and extreme lows within his moods. He felt coaching would align more with his personality.

Marcus is a very talented musician, who is always seeking out things to do in order to keep himself busy. He was diagnosed with manic depression when he was in his teens because of big anger outbursts and severe highs and lows in his moods. He was given anti-depressants to correct the mood swings and the depression, but felt as though they ate away at his personality, taking away his senses and drive for anything. The comparison between his usual self and his self on antidepressants is quite extreme as he is a very creative individual, therefore the opening for energies to flow through him is much wider and therefore more intense.

Creatives tend to experience emotions more intensely; they have an opening that will channel through a lot of intuitive, creative expression, epiphanies and creations, insights that come to them because of that opening. A more positive channelling of the creative flow coming in means that there will also be an opening for real depths of the counterpart, the lows. The higher the highs, the lower the lows. So, for creative individuals, it is even more important to find an inner

balance between the two polarities, in order to understand where to find and execute a stop in their minds to prevent lows or encourage highs. It is also important to identify where the boundaries lie, as such identification determines whether the outcome is a result of the soul or the ego.

It's important to mention why understanding the difference between reactions of the soul and the ego is so important to me. Most people desire true and long-lasting fulfilment, as opposed to short circuit, short-term fulfilments. Once you are aware that long-lasting fulfilment will never be achieved through the choices of the ego, through your own intuition there will be a growing desire to make choices based upon the impulses of the soul.

Marcus' depression has been marking him all his life, so much so that he identified as a manic depressant for a long period of his life. It is only now, finding himself at the right time and place in his life, and coupled with life coaching conversations, that he has learnt to relax his mind somewhat, learning to be OK with who he is. He is now learning to befriend his own identity for the right reasons, while at the same time eliminating anxieties about the future and gaining trust in himself on the way. Most of our conversations would portray Marcus as having trouble accepting the situation the way that it was. Never feeling good enough, feeling pressure and carrying a sense of shame within him constantly. He said he would go as far as putting on a "perfect man attitude, giving the right handshakes" just because it was seen as 'appropriate'. He said that a lot of his identity was 'acted out' especially to impress other people. Not because he wanted to fool anyone, no, but because he was seeking to embody the type of guy that he thought he had be. So he acquired certain characteristics, belonging to a certain etiquette, making him the man he thought he 'should' be.

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Now, 'shoulds' can be an indicator of someone not feeling good enough in the now, and potentially talking about something that doesn't apply to how they actually are as a person. Often it is something that someone else might have projected onto you, that might be keeping you from doing the things that you actually want to be doing. This focus on the 'should' will most likely keep you trapped in not doing whatever that 'should' actually is, perhaps conjuring thoughts about you not being good enough as a result, again preventing you from doing what you actually truly want to be doing, without having properly explored what thoughts, unknown desires or beliefs are behind your 'shoulds'.

Further conversations with Marcus led to talk about parents. Parents mark the beginning of our lives. Our parents are the ones who we see the world through for many years at the start of our lives. When we reach the age of about 12 or 13, we start to break out of the energy of living through the spiritual guidance of our parents and make our own minds up. This breakout often leads to a period of rebellion and confusion, anger and depression and even substance abuse in some cases... The kid is trying to break free while the parents still have so much influence and say over them and what they should do or feel. It is childhood that sets the tone for the oncoming years, and for some this presents quite a struggle.

It is worth noting that whilst parents play a pivotal role, kids learn not only through being told things, but through observation and copying. The parents/caregivers, people around the child, are the child's role models, and therefore the child will copy their behaviours and their energy. What the child hears said, even if not directly to them, will impact them greatly throughout their lives, both consciously and subconsciously. These ideas are ingrained and repetitively played over in our heads, creating neurological relationships that breed our habits, resulting over many years in the strong beliefs that we identify with. If these beliefs are broken down or taken apart, then we lose that part of us that we identified with for so long, and begin to feel lost,

uncomfortable, distressed, stressed, hopeless or even fearful. But this breakdown is essential to renew our energy, keep in motion and keep developing so that we don't create energetic stagnation.

The ideal identity is one that keeps changing. When we identify too much with one thing we get stuck, we get bitter, we don't dance with life anymore. There is no exchange, we merely collide with it. With the understanding of challenges or problems as an essential and normal part of life, comes less fear of these challenges. In fact, we would be more likely to welcome it, as we realise that it is inevitable. With the consciousness of knowing that challenges are there to help us grow, we wouldn't experience feelings of discomfort or distress for too long and would be released from them with extra strength, calmness and new insights.

When I met him, Marcus' identity was influenced by everything from his parents to his environment and his own selective choosing, both consciously and subconsciously. I noticed that when asking Marcus about his parents or his girlfriend, he would be saying things that would feel emotional to him or even a bit painful, but he always excused them at the end of it, feeling clearly uncomfortable about leaving them in a bad light. He feels strongly about talking positively about these important people, even though he admits feeling negative emotions at times too. He doesn't like staying there in that negative space. The way in which his parents affected him was through indirect impressions of what 'good enough' means to them, whether this was through the way that they communicated with each other, through the way they chatted to friends, through comments at the tv or about others, or through their own aspirations and ideals. Marcus automatically sought to match up to those expectations, not because they made him but because he received the information in this second-hand manner. This was just the unique set up of his character, which might be completely different to how someone else would receive and digest this information.

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Could it be that Marcus' strong emotional outbursts might have to do with him suppressing his feelings? I think so. He has been getting a grip of this more and more, as he becomes more self reflective. I had the feeling it is almost like he doesn't feel comfortable feeling his true emotions around things that upset him, as that would make him feel vulnerable and he fears that he may lose control of himself. So in our coaching we take it step by step.

For him personally it's important to feel empowered, which is all about taking off pressure. Talking about everything really helps him the most. Venting, contemplating and reflecting. Taking off the pressure for him means doing less, at least for the time being, and accepting that he is happy with where he is at, right here right now, seeing the bigger picture and not getting lost in the detail. It is important that he feels confident with who he is, and is able to separate the talk that is his own and the talk that has been created through situations where he felt uncomfortable and therefore felt the need to prioritise others' happiness over his own.

The only person putting pressure on Marcus is Marcus. And realising that he is putting this pressure on was a huge breakthrough. At first he struggled to realise this, but as soon as he did and he tried to relax the pressure, the difference was immense.

Everything is a choice. Our decisions are often made in an impulsive and automatic fashion, unless we take a second to consciously think about the choices, and decide wisely. This goes back to the shapeshifter example. Why did he do it? Why did he put so much pressure on himself that it made him feel so depressed? Not because he enjoys feeling stressed out and low all the time, no, but because he had a goal in mind to be at a certain stage in his life, and he wanted it as soon as possible. He wasn't listening to his body and his intuition telling him to slow down and be patient, and he was focusing on being someone else than the person that he actually is right now. Why? Because he thinks of others, how they will see

him, what reactions they will give him, and fears that he wouldn't be good enough. Not good enough for his parents or his girlfriend or his girlfriend's parents. He feels a strong need to always be better, usually overtaking himself, having breakdowns because the pressure would be more than he could realistically handle. He wouldn't allow himself to just be.

Attachment is another factor that could have added to his depression: certain ideas, people and outcomes that he was attached to without flexibility, as his identification with these concepts was so high. What might lie behind that attachment? Questions (fears) like this come to my mind: what would I be without them/it? Who would I be? Identity stands and falls with attachment to those ideas and ways of being (all connected to the energy of the ego) until you let go, until you surrender and trust in life, following the guidance of your soul, your intuition, your own inner map.

The art of coaching has enabled Marcus to bring a lot of the subconscious to the surface for him to see with more clarity, so that he could decide what he wanted to keep, and understand what doesn't resonate with him any longer. Sometimes we store stuff we don't need anymore, which might have been needed at some point in the past and stayed stuck with us since, because attachment is easier than detachment. With this knowledge, he was able to relax himself in the here and now and create his own authentic identity, in congruence with himself, through taking off the layers he realised he doesn't need and which no longer serve him. Now his identity is being run from the soul side, more than the ego side. He said that now he is still his honest, more vulnerable self, but is much wiser and more reflective because of it. The moment he slowed down, his mind became calmer and stronger, and he began handling his outbursts differently. Now he notices his shapeshifting and manages to deal with it in a conscious and mindful way.

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Marcus came to coaching saying that he wanted to improve his relationship with his girlfriend. Move over to be with her and get out of his rut, alleviate his outbursts of anger and untamed emotions. He felt that he had not been 'himself' the past year. Much of his anger came from the memory of who he used to be, the self that he knew from before, being reminded of all the things he was missing now and dealing with things which were confronting him. Living back with his parents, it felt like his life had broken down. He always wanted his old life back and was very hard on himself over it.

Five sessions in I received a thank you email, explaining how he sees things in a different light now. He told me how much he had gained through talking, and how much of his torture has been relieved. Now he sees the purpose of the 'stagnation' and is able to shift his perspective to seeing a better version of himself developing. A version that is not attached to a specific outcome, but trusting in the fact that things will come his way of their own accord. He says he is still feeling pain, still having his moments, but he feels a change he can't describe, as though something has been lifted.

This is the true beauty of identity when you let it happen. You can be anyone and anywhere, but there is a unique path of your own to be walked, with a vast amount of choices and outcomes, and you always have the ability to choose! You are not constrained to living the ideas of other people, nor is there anything to fear.

Identity is at its best when it is lived and expressed, not suppressed. Be you!

IDENTITY SHIFT OR JOURNEY OF SELF?

Maggie Campbell

Self-identity is defined as the degree to which engaging in a behaviour is essential to an individual's self-concept (Stryker, 1987). An individual's identity is a combination of his/her personality based on experiences (Clancy & Dollinger, 1993; Erikson, 1963). Self-identity can be expressed through interactions...

My coaching work centres around health, wellness, empowerment and transition. Self-identity is interlinked with all of these elements. As a health professional (nurse and midwife) I have worked with many families as they transition into the parenting role and their identity as a parent. I have witnessed the benefits and power of continuity, i.e. having access to a named person, and how this impacts on the start of family life, and perhaps more importantly how it impacts mental health and an individual's transition into their role and identity as a parent. This is evidenced in a nationally recognised research project that I was involved in.

Most services that are provided around parenting, from the antenatal period until the end of the teenage years, are prescriptive and limiting in their ability to tap into the hidden potential of the individual. During pregnancy, time and energy are spent on medical aspects and the birth itself, with little time or focus on the transition into becoming a parent. Often the transition into becoming a parenting partnership or a couple has not been explored.

Parenting, like life, is an adventure with many ups and downs in which individuals challenge their identities from many perspectives. This includes self-identity and identities of parent, co-parent and worker. It is no wonder that we question "What is 'work-life balance'?" and "How

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this can all come together?” Parents often state that they believe their own identity is lost along the way, and they have actually forgotten how to care for themselves.

Coaching provides a confidential space for clients to explore their beliefs and values, one which enables them to focus on what is important for their lives and how to move forward. It does not examine what has gone before; however, there are times when a client requires the opportunity to reflect on what has passed, in order to understand when and why they became ‘stuck’. This enables them to identify new ways of thinking and behaving, and to identify opportunities for change and personal growth. The coaching space facilitates conversation and exploration around long-held beliefs and values, and around questioning and clarifying goals.

The striving for identity is a fundamental, complex and challenging issue for all individuals – from birth to grave. As human beings, we are designed to question, explore and undergo continuous change as we face new experiences, challenges and influences, which we perceive as either being in or out of our control. We have a desire to fit in, belong, be accepted and contribute. Alongside this are our struggles around self-perception, worth and identity.

The formative teenage years provide a powerful example of the beginnings of rapid change in identity being formulated. Personal goals, values and beliefs start to emerge as the adolescent questions previous beliefs they have inherited or acquired from families, friends, educationalists and the society in which they have been raised. It is no wonder that these years are considered the most challenging and influential in the shaping of self and belonging, to equip the adolescent for adulthood. Children are taught how to behave and are bombarded with instruction throughout their childhood and schooling years. Despite many opportunities and programmes that are offered around social health and development, many children are not afforded the opportunity to explore and question without judgement or guidance. It can be argued that this could hinder the

full opportunity for children and adolescents to become resilient and self-aware in a way that suits their needs and personality, all of which is required for the building of identity. As the adolescent withdraws from their parents, the opportunity to open up may diminish whilst the dependence upon peers for validation increases.

During many years working with families within health care, I have encountered individuals who have become 'stuck' and unable to reach their full potential because they have not shaken off or moved on from their unmet childhood needs. Perhaps more importantly, they have not been given the 'permission' to use their willpower, intuition and creativity to guide their future. If a negative self-image and identity develop, it can become increasingly difficult to move away from these entrenched beliefs as the pressures and demands of life take over.

Patterns of parenting have been examined and it is recognised that these patterns are influential on the behavioural and developmental outcomes for adolescents. The purpose of my case study is not to question these parenting styles, but to examine the effects of some aspects of my client's parenting experience that caused her to become stuck in her personal growth, limiting her ability to parent in the way that she wished to.

This case study provides insight into how complex life can be today, and how the sense of identity can appear like entrenched childhood overspill. Sarah is not unique. We have all been influenced by our parenting experiences. In turn, these experiences can impact on our parenting, and the experiences of the next generation and the identities of all within this continuum.

My client's story is multifaceted and does not centre around one identity or parenting issue in isolation. Issues of attachment, identity development and achievement feature throughout. Likewise, my client's 'nuclear family', the roles and influences of both mother and father, have impacted on her core belief of self-worth.

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Sarah's Story

Sarah referred herself with the desire to become a better parent and described her goal as follows: "I want to reduce my shouting, become more tolerant and be a better parent." The catalyst was an event in which a teacher witnessed her shouting at her daughter not to run into the road. Her seven-year-old daughter had slipped her hand and had run across the road to go into school. This event caused her to question herself and her ability as a parent. Her questioning focused on her belief that she "was not a good parent." Sarah felt she was being judged by the school and was now under scrutiny.

Sarah works hard and juggles two jobs, a new relationship, an acrimonious previous relationship and a stepson who spends considerable time with her and the current family. Her daughter spends weekends with her father; however, he is often unreliable and does not turn up or stick to agreements.

Geographical locations meant that our coaching sessions would have to take place by telephone, so it was agreed that this was the best approach. Sarah welcomed the 'anonymity' and felt more comfortable not being seen. Looking back on our sessions so far this has been a successful choice. As a coach, I have been able to heighten my listening ability and not be distracted by what was visually in front of me. This approach also enabled and empowered Sarah to be her authentic self and to open up in the way she needed to.

During our first session, we explored the reasons why Sarah considered coaching as the best course of action for her needs. She explained that she had tried various approaches in the past which had included counselling and CBT in an attempt to address her behaviours and beliefs. Her previous therapies had left her feeling let down in that no tangible change had taken place, and where it had it was temporary. She felt alone outside of the therapy, and was unable to find the skills or the energy to put what had been learnt into practice. The outside world was overwhelming and she admitted she did not know where to start.

Much of our first session was around developing rapport and trust and providing Sarah with the opportunity to 'offload'. There were tears and frustrations during which I held the space and maintained presence so as not to interrupt the flow. Much of this first session was Sarah's outpouring of her perceived inadequacies as a parent, and how this had implications for her daughter and how the school viewed her. She was full of panic and her stress was apparent: she did not want the school to 'press any buttons' for intervention.

We discussed the coaching contract and it was agreed that the correct approach for Sarah was to continue to discuss our contract during our next session. Even though we were able to address the fundamentals around the meaning of coaching, our roles within it, confidentiality and commitment, it was too soon to go into too much detail at this stage as she was not ready or able to contribute further. We decided that as the coach I would email her a draft copy for her consideration. It was important to Sarah to have a copy of the contract and to consider the implications. The coaching contract ended up being a positive tool that empowered Sarah and gave her a sense of worth, recognition and a deeper understanding that the coaching was to be about her and she would be given the confidential, non-judgemental space in which she could honestly open up.

During our subsequent sessions, it became apparent to Sarah that her commitment to previous forms of therapy had not been ideal. She recognised that she had not been given the opportunity to fully explore her beliefs and values in a positive way. Her experiences had been around looking at the negative and attempting to change behaviours without giving herself permission to be 'released', so she could move forward in her own right and behave in different and positive ways. As things progressed it struck me how powerful her coaching experience was to her, and how she was able to start moving from a point of identity crisis to one where she was actively seeking possibilities and opportunity for change.

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We discussed the value of 'homework', and Sarah decided she wished to be set exploratory tasks around the issues she had raised and where she had identified the need for change. I researched and referred to tried and tested models but decided to tailor any models I was to use around what it was Sarah wished to explore further from our sessions. The tools were also designed to maintain momentum within the coaching experience and provide clarity. Sarah found this to be particularly helpful and would ask for 'homework'. Interestingly the homework and feedback from any work that Sarah completed helped her reflect on her growth and the positive progress she was making. For me as a coach, it was important to be mindful of the nature and timing of 'homework' so that it did not have a negative impact or overwhelm Sarah. It was also important that I recognised the benefit within the coaching journey.

Over time, the conversations and questioning took on a deeper meaning, and I was given permission to challenge Sarah's firmly held negative beliefs around her identity. As our sessions continued we explored her self-esteem, what it meant to her, what it looked and felt like and how it impacted on her day-to-day life, both inside and outside of work and in particular as a parent. As she opened up further it was evident that she did not want to dwell but wanted move away from her previous unhelpful negative thinking. As a coach, I was able to question Sarah around her understanding of 'where she got stuck' and she was able to consider her emergence as an adult and recognise that she was adopting a childlike stance in reaction to certain situations, rather than taking on the role of the adult. As the conversation developed it came to light that Sarah had moved house many times as a child and that her biological father was absent for most of her childhood. Her mother had replaced him with many partners, some of whom had violent and abusive tendencies.

Sarah began to recognise that her emotional and behavioural reactions came from fear and a lack of acceptance. She further recognised she needed to readdress her behaviours so that they did not affect

her daughter. Listening to Sarah I could see that she was self-aware and was able to recognise her areas for development, however, she needed to come to her own understanding and be able to check her behaviours from a conscious level in order to effect positive change. As a coach, at times I adopted a questioning approach that enabled Sarah to 'look into the mirror' to give her the opportunity to explore some of her reactions, and to identify some of the reasons and triggers behind them. This was taken further and we explored how Sarah's daughter might observe some of these behaviours, interpret them and internalise the meaning of them from a point of self.

Sarah was then able to facilitate her own identity development by setting herself reasonable behavioural expectations and clearly identified goals, which were achievable and could also be translated and embedded into her own parenting style. She further recognised that her own parenting experiences had impacted on her own identity as an individual and as a mother.

The breakthrough came when she identified that her 'anger' and her current parenting style had been as a result of her own parenting experiences, but also, more importantly, when she perceived her desire not to identify with her own parents. She wanted to move away from and to protect her daughter from the same influences that she believed had stunted her own development of identity. She recognised that this was where she had become stuck and, more importantly, that she was taking positive steps for change. She started to take responsibility and to enjoy her journey of self-discovery and transition. As a coach, I had had to curb my need to point this out to her earlier. I reminded myself that this was not my journey but hers. Reflecting back, if I had pointed out this connection for her she may have come back to me to challenge it or it could have produced a negative rather than a positive outcome.

During our sessions, Sarah referred to her daughter's father and how she wished to manage differently the situations around their

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relationship without interfering and influencing. We explored what this meant to her and what her concerns were. We also looked at ways in which she felt she could facilitate a relationship but at the same time take on the identity of responsible adult. This involved her questioning when she wanted to step in and how she could support her daughter's growing need for independent thought so her daughter was validated. As a coach, I used some of the STAR principles to aid the discussions around how some of these situations impacted on her thoughts and feelings, and the subsequent actions she would usually adopt, as well as what results this did or did not achieve. I then went on to repeat the process by giving Sarah the opportunity to look at the same situation from a different perspective and explore what results would come from the alternatives that she had identified.

As time went on, Sarah began to recognise how her daughter's visits impacted on her behaviour and that a pattern was beginning to emerge. She further recognised that she had to 'un-pick' the negative impact the visits had on her daughter and her identity, and that she had to strive hard to regain and maintain 'balance'. This was challenging for Sarah, and she actively sought ways in which she could maintain her stance as a positive parenting model to her daughter whilst not succumbing to her own learnt behaviours. We used visualisation so that Sarah could look at what she wanted to achieve in this situation, and consider how it might look and feel, both physically and emotionally.

The use of visualisation was a powerful tool for Sarah and one which she was able to identify with. It allowed her to step back from her emotional self and start to consider her identity as a 'parent manager' in this situation. Taking her emotional self out of the situation empowered her decision-making and enabled her to seek silence to consider the best course of action. We called this putting the 'parent manager hat' on. Using this approach of questioning we also focused on exploring how she could support and guide her stepson in a similar situation. Looking at an alternative but similar situation enabled Sarah to tap into her parenting skills in a way in which she had previously

not been able to do. This also affirmed her 'lost' belief that she could identify with herself as a good enough mother, one who was striving to support her daughter in the best way possible.

Sarah was committed to change from the outset; however there were times when I had to hold back on my questioning of this commitment. When Sarah 'disappeared' away from the process I could have easily abandoned and terminated the coaching relationship. I remained on course due to my belief that Sarah's desire for change was strong, whilst recognising how the challenges in her life posed a degree of difficulty for her. I drew from my understanding of her story and our conversations that the change process may take time. The deeply-embedded beliefs needed to be challenged at a pace that would afford self-discovery, and new beliefs might need time to be tried and tested. Despite this, I had to be conscious to listen to my self-talk and appreciate that the coaching journey, whilst being a partnership that is client-focused throughout, poses a risk that the relationship may be compromised and have to be reconsidered.

Sarah 'disappeared' for several months. I received a phone call out of the blue and was asked if we could continue our conversations. I made a conscious effort not to prejudge the situation and questioned Sarah to find out where had she been, what progress she had made and why she wished to return to coaching. To my surprise, Sarah could not wait to tell me that she had started driving lessons, something she had always been meaning to do. She had set herself a goal to pass her test by the time she was 26. She had also joined Weight Watchers and had lost a considerable amount of weight, and was practicing mindfulness. She had been working on her new goals and was waiting to achieve change so she could be proud to share her progress.

Part way through our next session Sarah identified that her goal to be a mother who did not shout was in fact not her overall goal, but was an objective to be obtained as part of a bigger goal - to become more resilient. Our subsequent conversations explored what this meant to

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her and how it would make her feel and behave if she reached this goal. Sarah offered up her new belief: 'If I can learn how to be more resilient I can help my daughter to be the same.'

With Sarah's permission, we went on to explore further an understanding of her desired parenting style to include benefits and insights. It was a delight to listen to Sarah. As she looked further into this issue, she began to share her beliefs and experiences, and recognised that despite her initial thoughts around her identity as parent, she had not been focusing on what she had learnt along the way but had been focusing on what had been wrong for her as a child. One striking realisation for Sarah was that her need for her daughter to have her father in her life was based around her own issues around her absent father, and that this transference of her own belief was not perhaps the best approach for her daughter. As she shared this I could sense her relief in giving herself the permission to let go, divorcing this belief from her perceived identity as a parent. Looking at this in a new way Sarah explained that "Yes my relationship with my daughter is the most important thing to focus on right now." It had become apparent to Sarah that her relationship with her daughter was based on trust and that the relationship was strong.

I asked Sarah what she felt she had got from her coaching experience so far. Her reply was, "Counselling keeps me down, coaching coaches me up."

For me, Sarah has challenged me as a coach in many ways. It has affirmed that I am going in the right direction and the experience has helped me look at my own beliefs and values. She has also shown me the power that can be unlocked in another individual from a place of anger and disappointment to one of happiness, hope, deep understanding and self-forgiveness. Resilience indeed.

Sarah is still a work in progress. Our relationship continues.

WHO WE ARE

Emma Dempsey

John came to me early on in my coaching career. He wanted to explore what it meant for him to be a man at this time in his life in the twenty-first century. He had recently changed careers and was exposed to conversations and learning that he hadn't been around before. The conversations that he was now part of intrigued and interested him, but they were making him question the things he had always assumed were right. John was starting to think more about his values and found himself wondering who he really was.

Our sessions took place by Skype, and from the outset we decided it would take as long as it would take. No time constraints, no pressures.

John was raised during the seventies and eighties in a family of what he perceived as masculine and heroic men. He was proud to tell stories of how they had influenced him, and of their bravery and unflinching determination during times of trauma and adversity. It was clear from the outset that his identity as a strong and 'manly man' was hugely important to him. It was crucial to John that he didn't ever appear as weak or vulnerable, and to be seen as either of those things, he exclaimed, was "his worst nightmare." For John, showing emotion or allowing vulnerability would not only mean he wasn't a real man, but worse still, it would disappoint the lineage of strong, masculine men who went before him. Those men fought wars, led teams into battle and saved lives, without, according to John, ever seeking help or becoming emotional. Who then was he to allow the trivialities of modern life to get to him?

But the problem for John was that life was getting to him: it was getting to him very much. John talked about carrying a lot of anger, and the feelings of 'inner rage' that he was having in everyday situations

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unnerved him. These feelings of rage and the unpredictability of how they might show up, meant that John was avoiding social situations and highly populated places. He joked about becoming a hermit as a way to deal with it, but it was clear that he was scared of how he might react, and whether he could contain this anger. Somebody standing too close to him in a queue, for example, was sometimes too much to bear. For John, the anxiety around what it would mean to walk away or 'back down' from a moment of perceived conflict was almost worse. What kind of man would he be then? For John, being a man meant behaving in a certain way; anything less was inconceivable. But this belief that he reiterated over and over again was no longer sitting easily with him, and as a result, stress and anxiety were penetrating his life on a daily basis. Asked what he wanted from our coaching sessions, John replied, "A sense of inner peace."

A lot has been written about the idea of masculinity in the twenty-first century that reflects the situation that John found himself in. It has been shown that the perceived pressure to look strong and not show weakness, along with the pressure to appear in control, can make men and boys more vulnerable to both mental health issues and suicide. This is nothing new, however. In their collaborative book *Gender Development* (1994), Golombok and Fivush claimed that men lived with pressure to endorse gendered identities such as being independent, strong and competitive, along with the pressure of denying their anxieties and insecurities. What John was feeling was not unusual, but he felt as though he was the only one, and he was confused by it.

John's first coaching experience was over two hours long. It was an intense session and a challenge to facilitate as a coach, but his need to speak was undeniable and the time given supported this. To curtail the session in any way would have ended it prematurely, and the space and trust that had been created might have been lost. Given a safe space to open up to probing questions meant John was able to discuss things that he had never shared with anyone before. Talking

about experiences from his life was a huge thing for him, and staying absolutely present as he explored his past was crucial. John recounted events going back to his childhood. He discussed how he and the men around him had reacted to certain things, and how these moments had influenced his identity today. These weren't easy things to hear, but observing the stress etched into his face and the way that he held himself during those first few sessions, it was clear that they needed to be worked through.

John talked through traumatic events that had occurred during his childhood, and his early twenties. While recounting the stories, he spoke often of how he had been able to retain the sense of masculine identity that was so important to him. Holding on to that identity throughout his life meant that he had never grieved during those times, never talked with anyone about them and never really expressed his thoughts or anxiety about what had happened or how he had managed it.

As a new coach the sessions were challenging, to say the least, and at times I feared that I would not manage to hold the space or facilitate John's journey in the way that it deserved. Also, the realisation came early on that my own assumptions would need to be addressed if we were going to continue working together. My own identity as a feminist and as a mother of boys meant that I would need to really focus to resist any internal dialogues and to stay present. My identity as a health specialist with a strong stance against the 'boys don't cry' ethos came into play too. Having lost a male family member to suicide the year before, I had made a public declaration that I would always challenge 'man up attitudes' if I was to witness them. Yet as a coach, any desire or urge I had to lead John or influence his thinking would need to be suppressed, and that wasn't going to be easy.

But there was something else I noticed during this process. Something that was bigger than any of these things, and it took a couple of sessions and some reflection for me to register what was going on. For the first

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time since becoming a coach, I didn't truly understand the reasons a client gave for the beliefs he held. I had studied masculinities at university. I was more than aware of the effects of it on our daily lives, and the perceived ideals about how men are expected to behave in a given setting. But I am a woman, and I identify wholly with being a woman; I am not a man and don't identify in any way with needing to remain 'masculine' at all times. This meant that it was challenging to truly understand the way John thought about things. Yes, I empathised completely and was both interested and fascinated by what he was telling me, but could I do the sessions justice and enable this process the way I so wanted to?

This was a revelation in itself and something that I initially really struggled with. How could I coach this man without a shared understanding to work from? My belief was that as coaches we are encouraged to move in to 'niches', to work with people that we understand and identify with, and who will also understand and identify with us, to allow for optimum growth. This is what I had read and what was discussed in these new circles that I moved in. I was concerned about whether growth would be able to happen with such opposing identities at play. This was something that I had to explore in more depth before continuing my sessions with John.

As a coach I too had regular sessions with my own coach, and I took these questions there to enable me to really unpick and explore them, bringing an awareness to any assumptions I had around the subject. I also had an extra session with a male coach as I thought that too might be useful. It was an incredibly interesting and insightful process that enabled me to move forward in a positive way, while simultaneously reminding me of the value of the coaching space. Half way through a session I was asked, "So what is it that you are assuming that is making this difficult for you?" I answered quickly, without too much thought, "I am assuming that I will not be able to help this process or my client as I am not man," and upon hearing this simple answer out loud, everything fell into place. Through this reflection, and

by exploring ideas around my own identity, I came to an awareness that I didn't need to wholly understand what John was feeling, or the things that shaped his identity. But there was something more than that. The realisation came, that by not understanding it fully, I would bring a genuine and infinite curiosity about what he was telling me and the rationale he gave. This might sound simple, but it was a revelation. A revelation that really excited me, both as a coach and as a human being.

And so my sessions with John continued with this new sense of clarity and curiosity. What I noticed was that this confidence in my ability and increased curiosity enabled our coaching relationship to flourish. Our coaching space became one of real and honest exploration and profound inquisitive conversation. It was a game changer for both of us and the sessions were incredibly powerful.

Somewhere around our fourth or fifth session John was talking about events that had occurred more than twenty years ago, and the fear that he had felt at the time. During this conversation, and whilst thinking about a question I had just asked, something clicked. A connection was made. The anger that John was feeling, the anger that was wearing him down and affecting his behaviour, wasn't anger at all. It was fear. The unfaltering, unshakeable, unresolved fear from over twenty years ago. It was still present, and permeating his life on a daily basis. John sat in silence with this realisation for some time. In the subsequent sessions everything began to change.

Through the process of our coaching journey, John realised that this person he had become was not actually the person he wanted to be, or even the person that he truly was. Within the safety of the coaching space John allowed himself to be vulnerable. By exposing himself to the fear that had sat within him all that time, by naming it and unpicking it, he was able to move away from it. It would no longer shape his identity. John was able to acknowledge that the fear might always be there, but now he knew what it was, he would be able

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to detach from it and rise above it. It no longer controlled him, he controlled it. Because of this shift in perception, he was now able to explore not only who he truly was, but who he might like to be, and how that would sit in terms of his sense of masculinity.

During one of our last sessions, I asked John if he felt any less of a man for exposing things and dealing with them during our time together. He looked to the ground and thought about it for some time. His answer came back with a look of surprise and a slow smile. “No,” he said, “not at all.” In fact, he felt more real than he had in a long time, more authentic, more like his actual self and more peaceful than he had in twenty years. John had discovered that by allowing himself to be more vulnerable he could be his true self.

John’s journey was a powerful thing to be part of and I learned an incredible amount from coaching him. Talking with him about it afterwards made me realise that it had a profound effect on both of us. I look back on our coaching sessions as a pivotal point in my coaching journey. Not only that, but working with John on his identity challenged my own identity as a woman, as a health specialist and as a mother of two young men. It made me more aware of the effect of masculinities on every aspect of our lives.

As a coach now working regularly with men around similar themes, I am absolutely clear that working with people that I may not fully understand allows a genuine curiosity, that facilitates growth and learning for both partners. I am also completely clear about the importance of being present: that to be truly present is a powerful and beautiful thing that enables people to flourish in a relatively short time. Lastly and most importantly, I know that if you hold someone in positive regard, in a safe and reflective space, no matter whether you understand or identify with what shapes their beliefs, then truly powerful things are able to happen.

IDENTITY: IS IT TRULY A HEALTHY AND REALISTIC CONCEPT?

Carole Douillot

So what is identity? I didn't want to look it up in a dictionary but rather think of what came up for me as my own definition. So, let me share with you what I think identity is. It is formed from our internal perception of ourselves, combined with how the outside world sees us and how we think we need to show up to match this illusion. Our inner self encompasses many aspects, from ethics to core values, beliefs to needs. The outer self is the layer that people can see from the outside: our looks, clothing, the way we talk, walk, smile... To be satisfied with one's identity is to feel complete, where both the inner and outer layer are aligned with who we truly are. This struggle has been at the core of many coaching conversations. The actual question has never been as clear as the "who am I?" but more a "what should I do?" in order to satisfy others' visions of me and avoid disappointing them, ultimately complying with a seemingly acquired identity.

So let's see how these identity questions and reflections show up in the coaching environment. Instead of looking at one particular client, I will reflect on several instances when the question of identity appeared in different persons and scenarios. This way, I will highlight a broader spectrum of situations.

Identity - the story we tell ourselves, influenced by what has happened to us

"My mum was an alcoholic," one client told me. Then the penny dropped. "She chose alcohol over me." Chloe clearly identified herself

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as an unlovable person, not worthy of love or attention. This belief was so much part of her, that it framed her thinking that she needed validation from others. When I challenged this limiting belief by asking: “How do you know for sure she chose alcohol over you?” I was able to shine a different light on her story and who she really was. After all, yes, she was a lovable person. This conversation allowed her to move forward with her life and make a crucial decision about her future career. Looking at the skills she developed throughout her traumatic childhood made her realise that she was a strong, resilient person and didn't have to hold on to this limiting 'victim' label anymore.

The loss of identity – identity reveals itself once we realise we've actually somehow lost it

Laura seems shy, quiet and lacking in confidence. She's still young, undecided on her future and not clear on what route to take to fulfil her dream to become a fashion designer. She seeks approval from her relatives. One session, our conversation got into “what would help you regain your confidence?” After searching, she realised that she had changed something in her daily routine. She didn't pick her clothes the night before in the same way she used to. She came to the realisation that her confidence was highly linked to this habit of selecting her clothes carefully. Gradually, she had stopped expressing herself through her clothing. The expression of her identity was showing through this. For instance, she had stopped wearing her favourite bright yellow jumper. This is who she was: a girl who wore bright, flashy clothes. This showed her that not going through this daily process any longer was a sign of this loss of confidence and identity. The goal she then set herself seemed trivial at first, but wearing her once-loved yellow top was a way for her to regain her sense of who she really was. She was no longer a girl who wore black clothes, but one who expressed herself with outrageous colours.

The change of identity - a period of transition

When Rita reached 54, having just undergone a major operation, she felt that it was time to reflect. She had clearly lost her sense of identity. She was a mother whose children had flown the nest. Her identity as a mum meant that other people's needs were put before her own, as she told me how she had *sacrificed* her work. She cared for her ill daughter and expressed the need at the time to have counselling as she had a feeling of 'lost self', her confidence and self-esteem also suffering. Through coaching she managed to change her self-perception, enabling her to reflect and take the time to talk about the process of change she had just seen before her eyes. Her forced time out had allowed her to spend time thinking of what she used to be and what she was to become. Her shift in identity meant she could accept being successful now, and the necessary validation was actually not coming from the outside but within herself. What had been holding her back was that very sense of identity, and allowing herself to accept that she deserved to put herself first helped her to move forward.

Rita's self-worth was highly connected with earning money. It was once she realised other people who mattered to her could see her as a success, that she not only could remind herself that she deserved success, but that success for her was at least in part about her earning power. Because in the past she had identified herself as a non-materialistic being, she was ashamed about the very concept of earning money. Giving herself permission to earn meant that she could get rid of the negative spin on money she previously had. During our conversation she made the connection that financial success was the missing piece in her identity. Being a financial success in her field of work would allow her to feel complete. Once she rewrote this mental picture of herself she was able to move forward and embrace what was at stake for her whilst feeling her newly discovered, true self.

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Rita now understands her purpose and how to feel fulfilled, and this removes her constant need to self-sabotage through accepting how she is now. She also realised that to get there she had to make sure she wouldn't revert back to old behaviour. One way to achieve this was to have clear affirmations on her mirror to remind herself daily of who she was and keep a clear focus. After a few sessions, she was going forward with applying her idea of her new approach to her business ideas. She felt so resolute that she was happy to take the risk of getting people's feedback on what they thought of her concept. Her gained sense of self was strong enough to apply the right filters when people commented on her ideas, and she didn't fear them anymore. Instead, she was prepared and ready to receive them. There was now evidently far less self-doubt about who she had become.

How we label ourselves – identity, an abstract and highly subjective concept – how we see and describe ourselves

Many clients used unhealthy labels and they were not even aware they were doing so. Jenny kept saying throughout our sessions: "I am stupid." I started making notes of this word and eventually asked her if she had noticed she kept using it to describe herself. Then, every time it showed up, we started laughing about it together. This systematic description of her being stupid was like an automatic means of identification. "I'm stupid." Where was this coming from? How long had she used this adjective as a form of identity? Again, bringing the awareness to her was a useful way to break an unhealthy and unconscious pattern. By challenging the very use of this label I was able to demonstrate to her how restrictive and negative the effect had been on her, and how she saw herself.

A label we are given - and the same goes with a label we have received from someone of authority, such as a teacher

The young man I am coaching wants to become someone great and wants to do extremely well in his business venture. Despite all the positive feedback he gets all around him, an old label emerges whilst he is speaking to me. One day, a teacher called him “stupid”. This triggered in him a strong belief that this was who he was, someone who couldn’t do well in his studies and was good for nothing. After a lengthy conversation with me, it was a revelation to him that this label did indeed no longer apply to him and he could simply decide to ignore it. He said with pride during the session, “This is not the person I am now,” and, “I have proof through all my successes.” Successes which included getting a degree in a foreign country, in a language that was not his first, that proved to reassure him that he was no longer this little boy he described himself as. He had previously accepted the label and now it was time for him to let go and move forward.

How we see ourselves in the present

In one magical session with a new client (it was actually the first time we talked) I had no idea about what the client was like or who she was. In a very short and deep session, the client was able to let go of her past and her fears of the person she used to be. In the session, the client realised what her old self was like, and who she didn’t want to be anymore. Just allowing herself to acknowledge who she had become was enough to shift her entire emotional being, allowing her to feel grounded and present. She was talking to me about the fact that she had met someone new. Her whole body was tellingly excited by the experience, as she referred to a tsunami within herself. The next moment, she was explaining that in the past, she had suffered in previous relationships, which was affecting how she was viewing

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this new one. She described her past attitude as someone who would sacrifice in the way she would give to the other person, but suddenly she could see that she was a new person and that this didn't apply to her anymore. The shift in identity happened when she noticed that she was able to have a completely different attitude to this new situation. She could see in this moment that she had changed, and this was when she said she was ready to let go of her old identity. All of a sudden, her rhythm of speech slowed down; she was quiet, still and peaceful. She closed her eyes, I am not sure how long this moment lasted but I could sense her inner peace. The battle inside her had stopped and she was free to enjoy who she wanted to be without fear of her past identity.

The inner conflict - Who am I? Who do I want to be?

This client is in her 40s, and thinks she is having a midlife crisis. We have many sessions in which we speak about her career, what she wants from life, her values, her priorities. She fears she might be depressed and has lost her zest for life. It was only in our last session together that the issue of identity truly presented itself. She revealed to me some traumatic events from her childhood, before telling me that she has a kind of split identity. Describing it as a kind of Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde situation, she seems to be genuinely scared of who she might be, and what she is pretending to be, caught in not knowing which persona to choose. She says that there is the kind one and the bad one inside her. On one hand she is this crazy, highly-sexed girl who loves partying and experimenting and on the other, this calm, tamed, established woman in a relationship. She explained to me how she used to be so involved in human and animal rights, how passionate she was, and how now she is hiding this side of herself as she thinks it's not appropriate in the world in which she finds herself. But what she is truly tormented by is how to show herself. She is worried that if she drops the mask of this nice person, she might fall back into her old *bad, nasty* self. She is even looking for the signs that this person

is still there, assuming that it will all go wrong for her again if so. She says it's like having two incompatible people inside her and admits lying to herself by not being her true self and pretending to be *good*.

I asked her a simple question. "Imagine you didn't have the traumatic events in your past: who are you, without this experience?" She actually couldn't get rid of who she had been, she couldn't disassociate herself from her past. We laughed about it, as we were going round in circles, and again and again she would go back to her past. As it was our last session, it was clear that I had planted a new seed in her head and she now had all the time in the world to digest and reflect on this question. I do believe that the work during the session is only the start of the process, as the human brain doesn't change so easily.

To conclude, this is a small illustration of how identity shows up in the coaching space. You might wonder how we end up working on identity; the truth is none of my clients ever came to me with the question "who am I?" or even with a clear goal to work on their sense of self. It just happened within the coaching space, naturally and without the identity question at the forefront of the conversation. But funnily enough, the question from me did pop up a few times: "who are you, and who do you want to be?" And these questions were really powerful as they had probably never been asked so bluntly before.

Being a transformational coach means that we don't stick to the surface. A client might want to lose weight as a goal, but by questioning the motivation behind it, soon the goal itself disappears as the client realises what is really at the core: self-acceptance. This is the beauty of my work. I don't just take for granted what the client wants but the clues emerge as the client expresses their fears and doubts...

The very fact that the way you see yourself can be your own barrier, means that being loyal to this perceived identity could generate self-sabotage, avoiding any chance of growth and change.

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Looking back at my notes from these sessions has made me realise how identity is at the core of my work, and bearing this in mind will allow me to be more aware of the unsaid and how it plays in the background. It's only with this greater awareness that I can truly call myself a transformational life coach. My role is to be able to spot and identify issues around identity in the client's narrative to allow for the client's transformation to take place.

HOW TO IDENTIFY 'IDENTITY' IN COACHING

Fawzia Bheekhun

How do I see my own identity? Well I am Fawzia. I am a woman with a mixed heritage, having ancestral history from India, Arabia, France and Mauritius. I see myself as a human being with a sense of belonging to the ones that I hold dear. I went to a grammar school until I was thirteen. I looked different. My clothes had a patterned design on them, and I had olive skin and jet black hair. I was a minority in the community. I experienced racism and brutal attacks on myself and my sister, but I loved the people that treated me like a person. One person shared their bread with me, something that I'll never forget. I loved being in school and learning to read and write. I found it really fascinating being with others. We looked different. We had different values and beliefs. However, even though it fascinated me, I wondered why I was treated in certain ways by certain people. After some time, I realised it had to do with my identity.

Now that I am an adult (in theory) and a coach, I have to face identity in others as well as within myself on a daily basis. The most important ingredients of the explorative process are self-realisation and self-actualisation. I believe that as an individual you have to understand your own self-worth and identity before attempting to understand someone else's. Noticing how we see ourselves and having a clear understanding of our own beliefs is important as it teaches us to value our sense of being in this world. Moreover, it is also vital to acknowledge how our thoughts and behaviour change in different contexts, how we want to be seen and received by others who we love, and that we are aware of our own congruence. In my profession, it is important to respect the client's own autonomy, personal choices, and safety within the therapeutic coaching relationship.

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Identity often presents an issue in coaching because it is important to understand our clients, and what they regard as equality is imperative to this understanding. As coaches, we need to understand which part of the client's identity is in crisis and what impact this has on their daily life, especially when they are transitioning into the next stage of their life or when they have suffered a loss. As coaches we need to consider whether we are compatible with the client, the right coach for them, and whether we are skilled in providing the transformational process for change. Moreover, we need to be aware of practical issues that may arise, such as the need for an interpreter, as there is such cultural diversity among the clients we may encounter. There are also some who would prefer a gender-specific coach, and that is all part of their desire to feel secure in talking about their issues with their identities. Being a person-centred coach requires you to be an attentive listener: this is a key skill to the understanding of clients' problems with identity.

As a coach, noticing how we see ourselves, having a clear understanding of our own beliefs, and valuing our sense of being in this world can have a big influence on the success of the coaching scheme for many people.

Ally's Story

Ally is a twenty-three-year-old Digital Photographer who graduated from university three years ago. She was a client of mine who struggled with an identity crisis. I was present with each stage of Ally's development and suggested the use of creativity: I asked Ally if drawing or taking photographs of different images would help her to express her own identity in the world. After consideration she agreed that it would.

STRUGGLE 1 - NOT KNOWING WHO SHE WAS AND WHERE SHE FITTED IN THE WORLD

Ally had been struggling to pin down who she really was and her place in the world. She felt stuck, anxious and extremely stressed, and explained that she wanted to have coaching sessions in order to understand her true self and the purpose of her life. These were extremely challenging times for Ally. She was presented with different identity issues as an individual, particularly what career she would like to pursue.

STRUGGLE 2 - HUGE AMOUNTS OF EXPECTATIONS FROM FAMILY CAUSED ALLY TO DEVELOP EMOTIONAL ANXIETIES

Another core struggle Ally faced was the onset of emotional anxieties as a result of her family's high expectations. These included becoming a successful woman after her graduation, increasing her income and finding a partner. As a result of this immense pressure, she felt she had lost the knowledge of who she truly was. This feeling was further exacerbated by her parents' frequent comparison of Ally to others. This had a huge impact on Ally's self-worth and self-confidence, as she was under a lot of pressure to please everyone in her life.

Looking back, I noticed that another key aspect of Ally's life was her religious beliefs. These played a big part in her sense of loss, as she was yet to fully connect with her religion, due to the loss of her identity and the lack of freedom she had to live life as she wanted. Corresponding to this, Ally explained that she felt she would have been rejected by her family if she were to be herself.

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STRUGGLE 3 - RELIGIOUS RESTRICTIONS STOPPED HER FROM PURSUING HER DREAMS AND WHAT SHE REALLY WANTED TO ACHIEVE IN LIFE

The last key feature of her identity crisis became apparent during the therapeutic coaching session. She explained that in regards to her religious faith, she had to attend lots of meetings during the week which took up a great deal of her time. In turn, this meant that Ally had a lack of time to pursue her dreams, and make practical steps towards achieving those dreams and what she wanted to do with her life.

Ally wanted to be coached in an effort to deal with the aforementioned struggles, however, she was under the impression that I would be able to give her the answers to her problems. I asked her which problem she wanted to deal with first, something which proved challenging for her to get her head around, as she was accustomed to being told what to do rather than making her own decisions. She was very quiet and kept saying, "I thought that you would be giving me things to do and would provide me with a quick solution." I allowed her to have some space to clear her mind, and in doing so allowed her to focus her attention on herself. Ally said she thought about who she was and what her actual identity was. From our session, Ally realised that her family values were very important to her, but they came at a cost: losing her sense of identity and who she was in the world. When that thought popped up she immediately felt guilty and selfish for wanting something different from her family's expectations.

Through the explorative discussion, Ally came to the realisation that she wanted to travel the world. She shared a really happy moment during the coaching session of visiting her friend in Madrid in 2017. It was the first time she had truly felt alive, and she recalled feeling a great deal of joy and pleasure in taking beautiful photographs of the natural habitat. Her physiology completely changed in the room. She was smiling and expressed her new-found passion to pursue travel writing and photography.

Whilst this was a great breakthrough for Ally, she still had to face her fear: telling her family that she wanted to leave home and start her own life. She felt a deep sense of responsibility for her sick siblings and her parents, and felt that by choosing to leave them or to seek an independent life for herself, she was being selfish. Ally was under the impression that she had to find a successful job to uphold her family prestige. This was not just what her family wanted, but what they expected from her. She questioned whether it was her own dreams or those of her family. Ally realised that her irrational thoughts were predominantly linked to the past and this triggered her to feel lonely and sad.

Looking at her experience from an introspective stance, Ally realised that her thoughts were outdated, and noticed the impact that returning home had had on her. She felt that she had to be separate from her family in order to maintain her health, and her expectations about what she wanted from our coaching discussions had changed as the sessions went on.

Although Ally had a life-changing experience through coaching, she did have challenging moments. She would get lost in her own thoughts about how others valued her introspective conditioning process. She conveyed her anger on a number of occasions during the process and I would reflect this back through open questions. “What is this anger you feel?” “Why do you feel like this?” “Is there a certain experience that made you feel this way?” Ally felt uncomfortable at first with the slow pace of the coaching session; however she realised it was a collaborative effort to explore and clarify what her identity was in the world. She was surprised that a total stranger had understood her true dreams and aspirations in life, and had listened to her not just without judgement, but with a great deal of compassion. By ensuring she was comfortable, I enabled Ally’s trust in me to grow, as well as her trust in herself, as she began to take the initiative to make her own decisions about her life and what she wanted to do on a daily basis.

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Even though Ally found the silence in the beginning very uncomfortable, as the sessions progressed she learned to treasure those moments of silent thought. She noticed that the silent moments allowed her to spiritually connect with herself, and the sensory world. By listening to her own words aloud and recognising her own emotions, she became more fluid in the way that she communicated her concerns and thoughts to me as her coach. She realised that she paid a lot of attention to how she described herself to others. Ally expressed that she hadn't realised just how powerful therapeutic coaching could be. This made me smile, as I could see her sense of awe at the success of our time together. She explained that due to the coaching she was now more self-aware and reflective of what she was putting out into the world, as well as how important it had been for her to value her family's opinion about what they thought she ought to be in the world. Allowing her to explore the answer for herself and simply guiding her ideas and reflections meant that Ally was able to identify her true feelings about her own life, giving rise to emotions that she did not know she had. This created a much more open-minded and calm space for our sessions to unfold.

Having a space in which she could invest her time in understanding herself proved to be pivotal for Ally's development. She expressed that for a long time she had not had a space where she could just be herself. Ally conveyed that she wanted to allow herself to experience the negative emotions as well as the good, such as reaching the conclusion that she did not have to please everyone in her family.

She took her self-reflective process further by taking the time to understand what she loves to do, in terms of hobbies. Ally explained she wanted to give herself the best life she could, by honouring the gift of life and seizing the opportunities that she had. She found that I was able to connect to her creativity and help her express it through her writing, photos and vision boards. The atmosphere she felt was one of comfort, calmness and a sense of inner peace. She explained

that she felt she now had a space in which she could let out of all her incongruence without any judgement or interruption. Making her own decisions in her life was something she had not previously experienced, and this new mindset enabled her to flourish.

She realised her career path was in travel writing and photography, which led her to seek a job within the travel industry. She had applied for a couple of jobs and successfully got an interview for one of them. It was a huge step and to this day I'll never forget her smile. She smiled with tears of joy glistening in the corner of her eyes. A joyous smile that was so heartwarming because it was so genuine. As her coach, I realised in that moment that creativity is sometimes an affirmation of people's pain, emotions, and experiences, as well as their transformational discovery into the unknown parts of their lives.

Ally realised that she was the only one who could face the layers of her incongruence through addressing the false identity she was putting out into the world. She understood this would be a difficult process, but Ally expressed how she felt a sense of safety to be herself, think for herself and identify how she wanted to use the therapeutic coaching session. Through the therapeutic coaching person-to-person relationship, Ally understood that I was simply a guide in her journey to her authentic sense of being in the world. She expressed her gratitude for the self-realisation that she had the intrinsic truth and strength to overcome her own troubles within her own existence.

One of my key beliefs is that it is so important to having an understanding of your self-worth. This is an important part of knowing yourself, and a very precious ideology in how we articulate our sense of identity and how we see ourselves.

Let's use an analogy. You are a five-year-old child who is energetic and full of life. As you are still young, you will usually have the freedom to express your spontaneous self, one that is vibrant and authentic. There is a general expectation or norm that as you are a child, there is no

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need to edit yourself to fit into the societal norms that are expected of an adult. This is due to the simple fact that as you are a young child, your mind has not yet been influenced by the societal conditioning and knowledge of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1996). However as you get older you start to look at others, and this has a huge impact on how you see yourself due to your surrounding environment and the society in which you grew up. You become shaped by societal norms that teach you how to act and behave as an adult, limiting your sense of freedom to focus on living and expressing your intrinsic identity.

As Ally's coach, I utilised the power of creativity to help her find her new intrinsic identity, encouraging her to keep a journal and read her favourite poetry. Ally also loved to dance. She used her body to ease the stress in her mind and to relax. This enabled her to feel calmer in the sessions, which allowed me to get to know her true personality. I found that she had a great sense of humour, and by understanding what made her happy she understood why she had become lost, and that it was okay to not have all the answers. She told me, "It is so lovely to be able to breathe so openly, especially when we did the walking enlighten coaching in the park. It was so enlightening and beautiful; these feelings and emotions are what I reflect on when I am doing my mindfulness affirmation which you shared with me during our session."

Ally's experience has had a positive impact in developing my own identity and experience as an existential coach. She taught me that I have to listen to my own beliefs and values in life. That uncertainty is cool. That it is okay if I don't have the answers for all my problems. Ally taught me that you could become your own leader and make your own destiny in the world.

What we experience with our sight, smell, sound, touch and taste, all has a huge impact on how we see ourselves. We identify our identities through our heritage, social groups, sexuality, education, profession, personal interests and social class. I encompass these concepts in

my coaching, using them as a foundation to create open questions that will allow the client to explore their identity. I believe in the power of the body, how we want to be seen and who we want to be. Therefore, deep space and stillness of the mind and body, as well as a transpersonal sense of existence, all need equal consideration in the coaching environment.

I attended Dr John Demartini's seminar and he asked the audience, "Who do you think you are?" Most people responded with answers like, "I am a lawyer, mother, lover, teacher." I sat there thinking: "Well I am just me and that is all I can be right now in this space." Believing in the power of self-efficacy is essential in coaching. As coaches we need to allow the client to be empathetic to their own explorative searching, and the meaning of their own identity and purpose in life.

The crux of it all is to flow freely by knowing who you are and what your identity is, and in doing so you will blossom. Always remember, your identity will evolve throughout your life, so embrace the change, live freely and stay happy.

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WHEN EVERYTHING BELONGS - FROM INNER WAR TO A FRIENDLY UNIVERSE

Nick Thorpe

I vividly remember the day my self-identity fell apart. It was a sunny Monday morning in August, and I was hunched at my computer, eyeing the approaching juggernaut of another writing deadline, feeling about as healthy as roadkill.

My basic resource, until that day more or less intact, was willpower. It had served me for more than 30 years as a human being and more than 10 as a freelance journalist, allowing me to win what I essentially experienced as an inner war. Sure, it had a cost: that morning I had shooting pains under my arms and was trying to ignore the beginning of a migraine – but with a book manuscript and two newspaper commissions to deliver, I simply couldn't allow myself to stop.

Or so I thought.

It was around 11.15 when, with a jolt, I realised I had been in a sort of trance for some time. Wearily, I focused my gaze back to my computer screen, which was surrounded by sheaves of paper, half-drunk cups of coffee, unopened bank statements and *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, the latest in a succession of self-help books I had entirely failed to put into practice. I looked down at my hands lying motionless on my lap like loafing employees, and angrily willed them back to work as usual.

But that morning nothing happened. The order from my brain seemed not to have reached the ends of my arms. The hands stayed where they were. I tried again, to no avail. It was as though two parts of me were deadlocked. I could flex my fingers fine, but nothing would induce

them to type another sentence. A sense of something like wonder overcame me.

I should have gone to see a doctor, but I didn't want drugs or another polite suggestion that I try and relax a little more. Instead, I dragged myself away from the computer and called a life coach.

It was the start of a journey that would ultimately reconfigure my very sense of self.

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"So how do you feel," asked Angela Court Jackson, a couple of days later, "about scoring *zero* for effectiveness?"

We were sitting either side of a scented candle in her sunlit Edinburgh office, a place of tamed, symmetrical in-trays and fresh white walls, on which a framed print of the Chrysler Building was thrusting aspirationally skywards.

By contrast, my answers to her pre-session questionnaire were a picture of bare survival heading to burn-out.

I look forward to getting up virtually every morning? Nope.

I have enough pleasurable time to myself every day? I felt sad just talking about it. When did life suddenly get so serious?

I told Angela about my hands going on strike. "If I were a company I'd be a pretty crap one to work for," I summarised.

Angela chuckled sadly. "So, here's a challenge: how can you, as boss, change the culture of your company?"

I thought about the 'boss'. He started life as a kind of metaphor, but I had to admit that his voice was worryingly recognisable to me. He was a sarcastic perfectionist who had grown so relentless in his criticism that I honestly couldn't imagine life without him. If I were not at my

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desk by nine am, he was already writing off the day as wasted. Most of the time I wanted to smother him.

But Angela offered something that would come back to me many times in the years ahead. “You’ve programmed this inner critic for a reason,” she said. “I don’t know if he motivates you to get to your desk on time, or what – but on some level he works for you.” Perhaps, she suggested, he might quieten down a bit if he knew he was being heard. “Have you tried thanking the critic? Because maybe some of what he is saying is of value.”

I stared at her. Her suggestion was so counterintuitive and strange that I had a feeling it might turn out to be very wise. I tried it out on the critic as I cycled home.

“Spare me the flaky New Age hokum,” he was muttering. “People pay money for that?”

“Thanks very much for your thoughts,” I said, keeping my (imaginary) voice bright and level like that of a call-centre worker. “Your opinion is very important to us, and we’ll take it into consideration.”

I waited for a comeback. But, for the moment at least, the critic seemed to have hung up.

...

What truly creates our identity in the world?

By the time we are adults, many of us have accumulated a tangled knot of contradictory labels. I am English, for example, but my home is in Scotland. I could define myself as married, or heterosexual, or white, or middle class, or any of the other categories we tick on census forms, but each demands a narrowing of the complexity of who I truly feel myself to be. I could call myself a searcher or a restless soul, but that would ignore the part of me that is happily rooted in my family and community.

A much more fundamental identity comes from my answer to what Einstein called the most important question: is the universe friendly?

That may shift depending on what happens to me, but as a basic orientation in the world, it will govern whether I go through life looking over my shoulder, expecting to be ambushed – or open-hearted and hopeful. Am I at war, or can I trust myself?

Since adolescence, my basic orientation was governed by my evangelical Christianity – the idea that good and evil would always be struggling for dominance within me. As St Paul put it (sounding in dire need of coaching): “The trouble is with me, for I am all too human, a slave to sin. I don’t really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don’t do it. Instead, I do what I hate.”

Although my belief in God also gave me a sense of the hugeness of possible love that awaited me, it did so at the cost of my self-acceptance, requiring me to give up the idea that I was okay exactly as I was. By the time I passed my 11-plus, I had a kind of trademark clench in me, the start of my relationship with that fierce self-critic who goaded me ever onwards towards the perfection I sought.

In many ways this identity served me well in the world in which I found myself. Through sheer willpower I excelled academically and I became a journalist and travel writer, fascinated by the way people live, how others found their meaning. My ability to force myself to do things I might otherwise have found frightening saw me enrol on a Pacific raft voyage, and then to make a pilgrimage around Scotland on a series of boats, resulting in two books.

But while I presented to the outside world as successful and ambitious, my partner and those who knew me best saw the price I was paying for this. I felt like an imposter, and sometimes the mask would slip. Once, while driving, I suffered a panic attack and had to pull over: I was terrified by a vivid waking dream of smashing my own bewildered face to pulp against the steering wheel.

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That morning when my hands went on strike was similarly frightening for someone who had always done everything through sheer effort. What dawned on me was what psychologists increasingly recognise: that crude willpower, like oil, is not a renewable resource. And mine had just run out.

What my life coach helped me see was that perhaps there was another, kinder way to relate to myself and the world. If I was going to avoid a complete breakdown, I needed to stop bullying myself into action, and risk trying out a different identity in the world.

...

I have to scroll back to the age of seven before I can remember an absence of that critical voice. It's a warm summer's day, and I am lying in the paddling pool at my childhood home, watching the patterns of sunlight dancing on the bottom, where blades of cut grass move gently backwards and forwards. The sun is warming my back, and the soles of my feet. It seems such an inconsequential scene – nothing happens, and nobody speaks – and yet I have returned to it often over the years, re-experiencing a kind of Wordsworthian yearning for this gentler time before judgement. Why had I allowed myself to become so crowded by adult concerns that I had lost the sense of vividness and presentness I once had? And was there a way of regaining it? I was determined to find out.

So I surrendered, blew some deadlines, let some people down and set out on a period of experimentation. Exhausted with my perpetual schemes for self-improvement, I decided instead to let go. I travelled at home and abroad in search of alternative role models – balloonists, clowns, adrenalin junkies, naturists, travellers, schoolkids, hippies, monks, spiritual teachers – people who dared to trust that the universe is friendly.

Instead of a binary world of good and evil, I began to see opportunities for engaging with my curiosity about those parts of

myself I might previously have shamed and exiled, and offering them hospitality. Jungian psychology was particularly transformative in this reconfiguration, with its theory of the shadow – that part of ourselves that we hide, repress or deny. Like a cat stuffed into a sack, anything pushed into shadow would struggle and scratch – but when brought out into the light it could reveal itself as beautiful and life-giving.

I saw this with my own eyes, when I was facilitating circles of men in the Mankind Project, using shadow-work. Where men would come wishing to crush a part of them that was troubling them – procrastination, say, or self-sabotage in relationships – they were invited, as I was, to try thanking that part of them for what it was trying to do for them. I watched furrowed brows loosen into wonder as men recognised how, for example, procrastination was making space for something else, or self-sabotage was trying to save them from disappointment.

In my own case, I saw how the critic was another name for the editor – that essential part of the writing process that helped me to hone and strengthen the life-giving creative splurge of the child into something ready for publication.

Instead of adversaries fighting inside me, I saw loyal allies with different jobs, needing to be acknowledged and deployed where they were most useful.

Redeploying The Loyal Soldier

This principle is most movingly illustrated by the true story of the loyal Japanese soldier, Hiroo Onoda, who was stationed in the Philippines during World War Two. He fought valiantly for his people in the jungle, but nobody told him when the war ended – so he and his men continued their guerrilla offensive, mistrusting attempts to stand them down as enemy propaganda, with bloody results. In fact it was 1974 – nearly 30 years! – before Onoda's former commander finally

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tracked him down to his island hideout and persuaded him he really could put down his weapons.

What moves me about this story is that it would have been easy to treat Onoda as a rogue operator who needed to be punished, imprisoned or worse. But even though he caused a lot of damage and killed innocent people, there was a recognition that he had been doing so out of ardent, if misguided, loyalty. So he was given a presidential pardon, honoured by his country and redeployed to become a peacetime role model for young people. He died in 2014, a national treasure.

In the same way, I have come to believe there is no part of me, or indeed life, which cannot be met with compassion and understanding, befriended and given a new role.

That's a massive change to an identity that, like Onoda, perceived most of life as potential threat. It has made a huge difference to the way I parent. For example when my adopted son refused to go to school, I quickly gave up trying to use sheer willpower, and decided to trust that he knew what he needed.

Instead, my partner and I decided to home-school him, enjoying the opportunity to give much-needed nurture and attention while he found his feet again. And sure enough, a year on, he asked to go back to school and rejoin his friends.

This new trust in the universe has inevitably governed my style as a coach, with a natural affiliation to the person-centred idea of unconditional positive regard for my clients' ability to grow. While traditional performance coaching might focus on pumping up willpower, holding clients to commitments and staged goals, I have much more interest in finding out about the part that feels stuck - inviting clients to bring that into the room.

My experience has been that such counter-intuitive hospitality is always enriching and expansive, albeit also a little frightening at first.

One client came to me frustrated by his desire to be creative in his film-making business, finding himself drawn into what he saw as 'box-ticking' administrative and logistical work instead. I wondered if there was a reason those two parts of himself needed to be enemies: "What might creative box-ticking look like?" I asked – and watched a huge grin spread across his face, as he realised he was framing as binary something which could be integrated.

A Naïve Narrative?

There are those who might argue that there's something almost wilfully naïve about believing that the universe is 'friendly' – how can someone who has dodged petrol bombs in the Belfast troubles, or interviewed holocaust survivors as I have, reconcile the evil in the world with a view that it is safe to be open-hearted in life?

Here's what Einstein said by way of elucidation of his question:

"If we decide that the universe is an unfriendly place, then we will use our technology, our scientific discoveries and our natural resources to achieve safety and power by creating bigger walls to keep out the unfriendliness and bigger weapons to destroy all that which is unfriendly and I believe that we are getting to a place where technology is powerful enough that we may either completely isolate or destroy ourselves as well in this process.

"If we decide that the universe is neither friendly nor unfriendly and that God is essentially 'playing dice with the universe', then we are simply victims to the random toss of the dice and our lives have no real purpose or meaning.

"But if we decide that the universe is a friendly place, then we will use our technology, our scientific discoveries and our natural resources to create tools and models for understanding that universe. Because power and safety will come through understanding its workings and its motives."

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An identity of open-hearted enquiry is by no means Pollyanna-ish or reserved for those too privileged to have encountered injustice or suffering. One of the most persuasive proponents of re-storying life did so in the very darkest situation: the psychotherapist Viktor Frankl was a holocaust survivor who lost most of his family at Auschwitz. In *Man's Search for Meaning* he wrote:

“Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances.”

His logotherapy was in many ways a forerunner of what we might recognise as narrative therapy or coaching – a recognition of our deep need for meaning in life, our ability to tell more life-giving stories, to change the frame through which we view what happens to us and those around us.

Can we believe in the whole of ourselves, trust in the light without ignoring our darkness? Frankl suggests that it’s hard to do this on our own: our happiness ultimately comes from our ability to surrender to a love that’s bigger than us, bigger even than death.

I have noticed that on days when I can do this, almost anything seems possible. I meet the world with open-heartedness, and in doing so, I create a whole-hearted world. Literally whole-hearted – I’m not dividing up the territory of myself, calling one part good, one part bad, one part neurotic, etc. Everything belongs.

My biggest fear – that without furious application of willpower, my life would grind to a halt – has turned out to be the very opposite of the truth.

Carl Rogers put it best: “The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change.”

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