



Base Metal...

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Introduction

Paul writes: I have found myself talking to coachees several times in recent months about curiosity, and the value that a curious mindset can hold, particularly for those who tend towards perfectionism and negative self-judgement. This prompted me to revisit a piece I wrote almost five years ago concerning imagination, and exploring the contribution it can make in coaching.

Paul and Ray **The Alchemy Team**

Imagine

The human imagination is a very powerful thing. It has given birth to the greatest inventions of human history, jaw-dropping art and architecture, transformational music. It is the engine of innovation, the centre of creativity and the one common element which characterises children's play. It also has the potential to become a hugely destructive force if allowed to spiral downwards.

Q. As coaches, are we trying to harness this mental power in our coachees for their benefit?

It can be very tempting (for both coaches and coachees) to fall back on the classic mantras that are around this area: 'fake it till you make it', 'if you believe you can achieve', 'live your dreams'. In my experience, however, there is greater risk that such a way of thinking becomes superficial, and doesn't result in ownership or authenticity on the part of the coachee, both of which are crucial for any change to be embedded and real. To my way of thinking, the job of the coach here is to construct a safe space where the coachee's imagination can be brought into play in a way that has the potential to shift perspective, and enable insight.

Several times in recent months, I have encouraged a coachee to realise (and I mean this in its 'make real' sense) the core content of the session – does this thing have a form? What does it look like? When that image (or sound or entity) is voiced and 'made real' by a coachee, that can open up huge potential to use it and extend it: for it to become a 'red thread' through a whole session (or indeed across sessions); a touchstone. Once it is voiced, that also opens up the conversation about choices and strategies, which is where a skilful coach's imagination can be brought to bear on something that is already real for the coachee.

Many coaching approaches make use of imaginative practice whether through linguistic metaphor, visualisation or the more formal structures of NLP for example. I would suggest, however, that there might be more opportunities than we normally recognise in coaching conversations to encourage the drawing on the power of the imagination in the service of our clients. I am reminded (for those of you who are Harry Potter fans) of Harry and his classmates being taught by Professor Lupin how to

battle and defeat the Boggert – a shape-shifting creature that takes the form of the observer's worst fear – by making the apparition appear comical. This seems to me a really interesting metaphor for how in coaching we can encourage something realised to become manageable or even surpassable through such use of imagination.

Q. Have you used an imaginative approach in your coaching recently? Did it work, and how might you tailor such methods in the future? If not, what might it look like if you did?

Book review

“Human Givens - a new approach to emotional health and clear thinking ”, Joe Griffin and Ivan Tyrell, HG, 2003 and “The Master and his Emissary - the divided brain and the making of the Western World”, Iain McGilchrist, Yale University Press, 2009

The first (described by Nick Baylis as “of sufficient power to completely revolutionise our approach to parenting, teaching and the caring professions”) proposes a way of understanding and supporting emotional health and the realisation of human potential; the second (described by A. C. Grayling as “beautifully written, erudite, fascinating and adventurous”) reveals how rigid structures, narrow self-interest and a mechanistic view of the world exert an enormous cost to human happiness and the world around us. Both books are extensively referenced.

These books are not new, nor are they quick to read, at 400+ pages. Investigations in neuroscience are moving at great pace and already some of the propositions in these books have been challenged by fresh discoveries. Nevertheless I choose to recommend them for their capacity to stimulate our thinking and challenge our assumptions about psychology and culture and hence our practice; there is much in each volume to provoke questions about how we coach and what difference we can make.

Griffin and Tyrell draw attention to the misuse of imagination and invite us to use our imagination more effectively. McGilchrist shares Blake's distinction between Ratio, the God of Newton and creative imagination, the God of Milton. What is my relationship with imagination, and how might reading these works assist me to know myself and even to venture into the imagination of others?

Thoughts, ideas and quotations

“Imagine” John Lennon

“Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world.” Albert Einstein

“An imaginative conception of what *might* be true is the starting point of all great discoveries in science.” Peter Medawar, and “The world shall perish not for lack of wonders, but for lack of wonder.” J. B. S. Haldane, quoted in “Phantoms of the Brain” by S. Blakeslee and V.S. Ramachandran

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