Base Metal...

October 2024

Alchemy of Coaching

Introduction

In Base Metal for June 2024 Ray quoted from what he could offer to his customers: "...I can support you to find your own inspiration and resources to be whoever you want to be." Really? In the introduction to that edition he had given an apparently contradictory spoiler alert: that in a future Base Metal he would address how we and our clients may not have the choice and agency which we assume we have - and what the implications might be. Here is that promised article.

Paul and Ray **The Alchemy team**

Being whoever you want to be?

Last month's introduction explored how we might work with reluctant clients - those, for example, who lack knowledge of what coaching is and offers, or believe that they are obliged to attend, or have no idea what to bring to the session. Some reasons were proposed. "Certainty and stability are, it seems, increasingly illusive. Apprehension and anxiety arise for those who can see no clear way ahead. When choice is absent or constrained the benefits of coaching may not be evident. Even when a level of everyday security is present, doubt about the future can erode morale, resulting in demotivation, depression and inaction. Meanwhile some people who are doing well don't expect coaching to be relevant for them."

Q. Have you met such responses to the coaching opportunity? If so, how have you responded?

Having prompted you to find constructive responses for the wary and doubtful client, what has caused me to return to the idea that our influence over our own and others' choices may be illusory? The answer is my reading, and reflecting on, Robert Sapolsky's book "Determined" (reviewed below). I had already read his book "Behave - the Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst", Vintage, 2017 and so been challenged to question my assumptions about choice, effort, merit and achievement. "Determined" builds on "Behave" to further examine the question of whether we have free will - and concludes that we do not. Lest this leave me (and perhaps by now you also) feeling disempowered and disheartened, or argumentative, I hasten to say that both books are deeply humane and point the difficult way to our shaping a more understanding and just society. The hard part is how to think and act differently to bring this about - especially if we lack the choices we think we have!

Q. What thoughts - and feelings - does the proposition "There is no free will" evoke in you?

Allow these thoughts and feelings your attention, curiosity and compassion.

Q. How does what you are noticing relate to your role and contribution as a coach?

Whilst I recognise that I'm concerned that I have exaggerated my influence and contribution as a coach, I'm encouraged to continue to value listening to my clients, being fully present and accepting that their sense of self is true for them. I'm encouraged, too, to continue to inquire with them about who they are, what they care about, what they want, and what resources they have or can access. What's different for me is that I am even more considerate than I used to be of the limitations of intentions to change, and more tolerant of apparent gaps between aspiration and actions. I will still recommend the insights offered by James Clear in "Atomic Habits", Penguin. 2018. Whilst I will still advocate having a 'development mindset' (Carol Dweck), I will be quicker to recognise that those with a 'fixed mindset' are so inclined because of who they are and what they have experienced. And, after the stimulation of "Determined", I'm now reading a book recommended to me years ago by a coach: "The Epigenetics Revolution" by Nessa Carey, Icon Books, 2011. I'm more grateful than ever that I have been lucky.

Q. What part does luck play in your appreciation of self and others? And in your coaching?

Whilst when coaching "I can support you to find your own inspiration and resources to be whoever you want to be" and I will seek to assist you to identify and deploy your strengths to do so, I recognise the inheritance and constraints which limit those possibilities. I will be *determined* and resolute in my wish to coach at my best, and every so often I will notice how pre-determined that is.

Book review

"Determined - the Science of Life Without Free Will", Robert Sapolsky, Vintage, 2023

Like its predecessor "Behave", this book is a big and serious read, richly evidenced and referenced, by a leading neurobiologist - "one of the most revered scientists alive today". It has been described as "Outstanding in its breadth of research, the liveliness of the writing and the depth of humanity it coveys"; "An utterly fascinating topic with mind-boggling implications"; "A bravura performance…he makes a moving case that [the absence of free will] is a reason to live with profound forgiveness and understanding"; and "Wonderfully readable…humorous and warm and humane." I endorse these descriptions: I was informed, moved, entertained, amused and shocked by turns. The first chapter is entitled "Turtles All the Way Down"*: whether you know this tale already or have not encountered it before, I recommend starting with it as a distillation of the profound implications of the research.

Thoughts, ideas and quotations

"The world is on the back of a gigantic turtle." * Quoted from a story attributed to William James.

"…we are finally starting to unravel the missing link between nature and nurture; how our environment talks to us and alters us, sometimes for ever." Nessa Carey.

"Luck: events that are subject to chance; fortune, good or bad" Collins Dictionary.

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