Base Metal...

April 2025

Alchemy of Coaching

Introduction

The stories we tell ourselves and each other to make sense of our lives and imbue them with meaning are suffused with metaphor. Stories require language, and the words we use to describe our experience give expression to the social construction of our reality. Metaphors provide comparisons - a means to make connections and so to shape and share meaning. How do they relate to the practice of coaching?

Paul and Ray **The Alchemy team**

Metaphor and meaning

Ray thinks: "Eventually I'll get around to producing this piece. I wonder what I will write about. Meanwhile my inaction is *a black cloud gathering* - I'll *get unstuck* by starting to type..."

I own my love of variety and creativity. This preference feeds my sense of being alive from moment to moment. It comes at a cost: my tendency to move on too soon. I say "yes", sincerely and gratefully, then, as I become aware of how much I've taken on, I wonder why I did that. This has (so far) been compounded by my putting off engaging with tasks on my 'to do list' in favour of new attractions - which results in self-imposed last-minute pressure-prompted action combined with wistful thoughts of 'what I'd rather be doing now'. Yet once I am immersed in the action I can experience a state of flow, where I have no awareness of time passing.

Q. *Do you recognise such patterns? In clients? In yourself? What opportunities do they offer?*

My animated curiosity shows itself in conversation: an extraverted capacity to interject. Learning to listen - really listen - continues to be a rewarding stretch challenge for me. In the requisite silence I might allow the thought that I'm *a fish out of water*: what am I doing by being a coach? When I'm coaching I sometimes imagine that I detect a sign of incongruence in the other person: are they *a square peg in a round hole**?***

Q. *How conscious are you of your own use of metaphor? How aware are you of your clients' metaphors?*

Sometimes the metaphorical comparison is ironic and/or aspirational for example in the name of a change programme "*Pigs might fly*", sometimes ambiguous and humorous as in the book title "*Fruit flies like a banana*". Ian wrote about metaphors in his Base Metal articles in August 2014 and July 2015, drawing attention to their pervasive use in everyday speech and similarly in coaching conversations. This topic caught my interest again recently at a meeting of Midlands Coaching Central. The session was delivered in an inquiring, engaging and interactive way by Clean Language practitioner Helle Browne.

Because we are unique individuals with our own differing experiences, preferences and interpretations of life, Clean Language is a method of honouring that individuality. Clean Language helps us to avoid jumping to conclusions via our assumptions and inferences and reduces risk from unconscious bias. Instead of paraphrasing what we have heard someone say to us, in 'clean' we use their exact words - free of our filtered interpretation. In the same way, rather than offer our own metaphors we use theirs - whether or not these make any sense to us. In Clean Coaching we ask our clients to say more, using their own language and their own metaphors, to support them to make sense and take meaning for themselves.

Q. *What experience do you have of coaching/being coached using Clean Language?*

Clean Language is much more than repeating back the client's words. Developed from the pioneering work of David Grove, this method facilitates the client to engage their own creativity to resolve issues. David Grove identified and frequently employed a set of nine basic questions, each question incorporating a word or phrase spoken by the client. The coach or therapist using these questions does have some agency, and responsibility, in choosing which of the client's words or phrase to employ in the next question. Noticing the client's verbal emphasis, facial expression, tone of voice, level of energy and pace will assist in selecting the most significant word or phrase to incorporate; and similarly when to change to a different question. Vocal qualities and somatic expression are significant: the non-verbal language of the client has comparable revelatory power. In 'Criteria for competence as a Clean Facilitator' the practitioner is expected to match vocal qualities when using the client's words - see the Appendix to Marion Way's book, cited below *.

Responses to the coach's clean questions allow the client to go deeper, to direct their own attention, consciously or unconsciously, to what matters most to them, and so allow insight and change. Clean coaching questions elicit metaphors, for example by asking "That ..... what is that like?" These questions provide a process which reveals to the client the nature of their 'symbolic modelling' through the particular metaphors they use, and may help them help themselves to recognise and change patterns which keep them in a bind.

Q. *The Clean Language coaching you have experienced* - what kind *of Clean Language* is that?

Book review

Metaphors We Live By, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, The University of Chicago Press, 1980

A classically definitive account of the part played by metaphor in language and the mind.

Metaphors in Mind - Transformation Through Symbolic Modelling, James Lawley and Penny Tompkins, The Developing Company Press, 2000

A comprehensive account of the theory and practice of Symbolic Modelling and Clean Language.

Clean Approaches for Coaches - How to create the conditions for change using Clean Language & Symbolic Modelling, Marian Way, Clean Publishing, 2013 *

A handbook of tools, examples and clear practical step-by-step guidance for their use in coaching.

Thoughts, ideas and quotations

"A metaphor compares things without spelling out the comparison." Gregory Bateson

"The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another." George Lakoff and Mark Johnson

"Our metaphors are like threads which weave together to create a continually unfolding tapestry - the fabric of our existence." James Lawley and Penny Tompkins.

"The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes." Marcel Proust.

"...and then what happens?" Marian Way

Let us know your response to Base Metal articles and reviews. ***We welcome guest contributors!***

Contact us We look forward to all kinds of communication for **Base Metal**... it's a forum for sharing and learning about coaching. Please do send us ideas, thoughts, suggestions or feedback.

paul@alchemyofcoaching.com **ray@alchemyofcoaching.com**

Alchemy of Coaching

Our coach development guides, articles and papers are available from www.alchemyofcoaching.com