Alchemy of Coaching

Base Metal...

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Introduction

The meaning of life has long exercised the minds of many people, not least philosophers and poets. In our work as coaches, we encounter individuals trying to make sense of who they are, why they do what they do, and what this means for them and others. Sometimes the person we are coaching is troubled by not being able to answer this question. Ray reflects on how we, too, are not immune from this uncertainty.

Paul and Ray **The Alchemy Team**

How and Who

I wonder if you have encountered coaching clients struggling to know what or where is next for them. They may describe a lack of focus, a loss of motivation, or being troubled that what they are doing or who they are being is not meeting their needs. Clarity of purpose is missing. They speak of falling short of their goals or expectations. Sense of progress is missing. Worse still, they feel profoundly stuck: trapped in current circumstances and unable to identify or effect a way out.

Q. How do you respond?

I am reminded of the power of silence; of 'holding the space' for the client; of staying with the tension, sitting with the uncertainty; letting go of the urgent desire for an answer, of wanting to know what to do; as Michael Bungay Stanier recommends: "lingering with the mess". My job as coach is not to fix my client… Yet this can be a challenge for me: 'I should know what to do; I fear I might be perceived as unhelpful or useless…'

Q. What is 'staying with the silence' like for you?

Feeling stuck is not confined to clients: sometimes we may experience this unwelcome condition in respect of our own business or practice. Goals may be elusive. Plans made - necessary yet not sufficient. Aspirations unattainable. Fresh ideas lacking. Clients scarce. Doubts about direction and focus. I know I'm stuck when the same thoughts recur repeatedly without resolution. If any of these examples of being stuck are familiar for you, where will you go to ask for help? Supervision? Mentors? Another coach? A community of practice?

Q. What support can you / do you call on?

I stay in touch with trainers from whom I've learned; I'm seeking to feel connected and to have my thinking stretched and challenged. Today I read a post from Sue Knight, highlighting the power of the question "How?". Rather than becoming caught up in overthinking, for example about reasons why, I can be attentive to what is, and notice patterns, for example in the words and stories I and others use. *How* do people do what they do? *What*, specifically, are they doing, saying, thinking? In the spirit of Appreciative Inquiry, what is working particularly well, and how can I experiment with that, myself.

Q. What part does, or could, modelling excellence play in your coaching or business development?

The theme I've chosen for this discussion is 'How and Who'. I'm moving my attention now from the 'How' to the 'Who', prompted by ending the previous paragraph with 'myself'. Who is 'myself', I wonder…

I recall attending a workshop entitled "Selves in Action" - to discover that those selves are all mine. Similariy, during a creative writing course I became particularly aware of my multiple selves when engaged in an exercise where, in pairs, we took turns to respond to the question "Who are you?" - the questioner remaining silent except occasionally, if necessary, repeating the question. Multiple selves were revealed. Internal dilemmas, conflicts, indecision and confusion began to be explained. Insights into other choices were uncovered.

Another memorable workshop comes to mind: "Wild Twin", when we were helped to discover those parts of us hidden, ignored or supressed, and give them expression: what a week that was, and how alive I felt!

Q. Which of your selves are engaged in your coaching? Which of your client's selves are at play? So…

Putting aside - for the moment - the big question of the meaning of life, what's my purpose for this discussion? To replace "Why?" with "How?" and "What?" and "What if?", the better to release ideas and energy and connect to possibilities. As coaches we have tools and techniques to assist later with testing and verifying, for example "IF you had that, would you really want it?"; "How is this outcome aligned with your values?"; "Who will you be being and becoming when you achieve this?". In Robert Dilts's model of Neuro Logical Levels, the most powerful levels - as sources for change - are Identity and Purpose. If I don't know who I am or I'm uncertain about my beliefs or my 'why', the 'what' and 'how' questions can free me to explore, inquire and discover. Then my action, or lack of it, will point to how good a fit there is with what really matters to me, and what that is.

Q. What have you noticed from reading this, and how can you use it?

Book Review

"The Meaning of Life - letters from extraordinary people and their answer to life's biggest question", James Bailey, Robinson, 2025

105 replies to James's request for how they "found meaning, purpose and fulfilment in their lives".

"Be Who You Want - unlocking the science of personality change", Christian Jarrett, Robinson, 2021

A psychological approach, based on the 'big five' personality traits, to "becoming the best version of yourself that you can possibly be".

Thoughts, ideas and quotations

"Communities are another self, another friend." Eric Barker.

"Survey after survey finds that most people tend to exaggerate the extent to which others think, believe, and feel as they do," Nicholas Epley.

"The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place." George Bernard Shaw.

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