

The Impact of the Inner Game and Sir John Whitmore on Coaching:

A Commentary

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INTRODUCTION

This is an important and relevant article, not because it prominently features me, I hasten to add, but because it raises issues far beyond coaching and the psychological profession. The first sentence of Simon Jenkins' abstract clearly states the "local" issue and this is where I will begin my comments: "The purpose of this article is to raise issues concerned with "coaching psychology" and the tension between psychologists and non-psychologists in the field of coaching." (p. 1)

I like the article, as far as it goes, and I think it is a fair and comprehensive assessment of the situation and, along with my comments here, will engender new perspectives, debates and actions. I intend to be challenging; for which I make no apology, because optimal learning takes place on the edge, as most good educationalists will know; i.e., the edge between the comfort zone and the stretch zone. I will assume that you will have read Jenkins' article before reading this, so some of the background of my entry into the coaching field will be familiar.

RESISTANCE FROM THE PSYCHOLOGY ESTABLISHMENT

Not long after I had started the Inner Game organisation, tennis and ski schools, in England during the early 1980s, I gave a presentation at what purported to be the first British sports psychology conference, and I was shocked to discover that I was the only person there demonstrating practical application – in this case on a tennis court. All the other presentations were academic research papers, boring minutiae to me, and none of the presenters actually worked with sports people to help them improve their psychological preparedness to perform.

I was told by a participant that sport provided a convenient, measurable, controlled replicable activity and environment for psychological research; an easy way to meet the expectation for academics to publish papers to maintain their status and tenure. As I had left school at 17 with no 'A' level equivalent, this society was no place for me. Of course I had not been to a conventional University, but I was well into another one, the 'university of life', which included professional sport, the Esalen Institute and many different forms of self-development.

My sport, motor racing, employed no coaches, but I had experienced sports instructors at school and elsewhere. (Why were they called coaches?) It was not until I discovered the Inner Game that everything fell into place, and I knew immediately that this was what sports coaching should be. Sport was, however, stuck in the oldest trap in the world of passing from generation to generation obsolete methods that were too entrenched in huge immovable institutions. The good coaches were the mavericks who bucked the system and looked forwards not backwards. Traditional behavioural sports instruction urgently needed to be superseded by coaching based on the emerging, Humanistic and Transpersonal psychologies. I had no idea how tenacious the old guard would be when I came up against them in tennis and skiing, and I was amazed to find that academic psychology lagged so far behind as well when I got involved with workplace coaching.

I am reminded of the time of the emergence of the Humanistic psychotherapies and the resistance that some of the psychological establishment had to them and they even wanted to police them or demand that practitioners acquire academic qualifications. One part of this was that Freudian analysis could take up to five years, and when Behavioural and Cognitive therapies appeared, analysts claimed that they could not be effective that quickly; then the Human Potential movement appeared and the Behaviourists objected for the same reason. Of course each evolution of ideas threatens what has gone on before, and even the livelihood of the practitioners; and I believe that there is an element of this between psychologists and coaches today.

Now let us turn to the big picture of the psychosocial evolution of the collective, and the psycho-spiritual evolution of the individual. I assert that humanity is in a new evolutionary watershed, one that individuals can go through quicker thus revealing the sequence of stages that the collective will reach more slowly. The watershed is the decline in the power and the respect of hierarchy, and its replacement by far greater self-determination and self responsibility. This will only occur after passing through a period of liberation and licensed disorder which may take decades. I believe it is as significant as the Reformation.

Coaching is the only profession whose primary product is self-responsibility, and one which remains non-stigmatised, unlike psychotherapy and spiritual teaching. It can be argued that the coaching profession has emerged and grown so fast in the past 25 years expressly to meet this need for individual and collective self-responsibility. Indeed coaching itself needs to be self-responsible and not be 'controlled' by the psychological hierarchy. The two professions need to stand side by side and learn from each other for the benefit of both. I believe that they both have an equivalent amount to learn from each other about content and methods, but then we come back to their application.

I gave a challenging keynote recently at the Association of Business Psychologists annual conference and asked them what they were up to. I asserted that many businesses and business leaders were dysfunctional today and that they urgently needed psychological help to lift them out of their adolescent, tribal, greed and fear driven behaviours. All the while academic psychologists were busy doing research which would only tell us in two years time what we know already, or some irrelevant other minutiae. A number of them acknowledged the publication problem, and that they had little hands-on knowledge, experience or the confidence to work

therapeutically with people or organisations.

Humanity is right now being hit hard by another great watershed, one that education has in part caused and could help to resolve. From the beginning of the industrial revolution 200 years ago, the new-found coal and oil fostered steel and immediate wealth for many, and we deluded ourselves that we could engineer our way to Utopia. We needed engineers and technological experts; and that in turn influenced the focus of education. Bridges, railways and steel ships were followed by cars and aeroplanes and some still believe that electronic marvels will get us there. Meanwhile, education became just about knowledge and was downgraded to league tables, degrees, etc. In the quest for ever more knowledge and technology, we lost the plot. We had focussed on quantity and missed quality. We forgot to teach wisdom, which enables us to use our technology responsibly. The result is that our technological misuse has taken humanity to the brink of self-elimination; first through nuclear weapons and now through non-renewable resources and uncontrollable emissions. We don't even have to foolishly push the nuclear button anymore; just doing nothing will be sufficient to wipe us all out.

Coaching teaches nothing, but evokes that which is within. That is where wisdom resides along with self-responsibility, emotional intelligence, freedom from fear, authenticity, values for the good of all; and so much more. Do we learn those qualities in school? No. Do we learn them in University? No. What about the psychology department? No. Do we learn them in business school? No again. Our education system has much to be accountable for and a great deal to learn.

WHAT VALUE CAN ACADEMIC PSYCHOLOGISTS ADD TO COACHING?

We can learn from each other and with each other. Of course there are coaches who have too little psychological knowledge, but most of the schools of coaching do cover the basics in an experiential format. There could and should be more. However, many coaches also have background experience in psychotherapy, which even if it did not lead to a degree, is often far more useful to a coach than all the psychological theories. For coaching, people skills are paramount, published papers are not. Of course therapists do accumulate a variety of psychological theories through their reading; which is fine, provided the author's views are seen as opinions not the truth, and as useful but not the only way.

The science of psychology is relatively new and is evolving; that which is seen as true today may be superseded tomorrow; that which is true of many people is not true of all, and it may require sensitive eclectic and often intuitive abilities, to choose an effective approach to a client. In those cases, too much adherence to or reliance on academic theories may well be a distraction and do more harm than good. I am tempted to turn the challenge the other way round and ask the academic theoreticians to prove that they can add value to the coaching profession. Of course they do in some ways, and I encourage coaches to pick up all the psychological knowledge they can along their way, but I don't believe that the theoreticians contribute as much practical value as they like to think they do. A little more humility from psychology departments might be in order in the light of these bigger issues about which they seem to know or care little.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

I often ask a group of managers or trainee coaches to identify from their childhood an older person, other than a parent, who they still remember today with great affection, and to recall the qualities this person displayed that made him, but usually her, so special. Their answers are so consistent (regardless of culture) that I put them up on the screen before the sub-groups have finished sharing their own examples. This exercise provides a great understanding and illustration of what emotional intelligence is, and this is far easier to relate to and replicate than a written list of qualities that research has shown that emotionally intelligent people possess. I then point out that their grandmother, say, could equally have been described as a good coach, but had she ever done a coaching course or studied psychology? Of course not!

In his article, Jenkins refers several times to Esalen Institute, which is where I learned my psychology; not intellectually but experientially in therapy groups of all kinds but humanistic psychology based in the main. We were specifically invited to leave our brains outside the door and bring our senses and emotions to the table on the basis that analysis blocks or distorts experience, and limits the effectiveness of the therapy. It was of course fine to theorise about it all afterwards, but vital to have the experience first. How many academic psychologists have that luxury? Incidentally the extremes of the processes, the emotions and the catharses evoked by the experimental therapies on trial in those early days were hugely educational, but would scare the hell out of many university psychology students and professors alike. They were good times, and learning times that contributed hugely to my coaching, which followed a year or two later.

TRANSPERSONAL PSYCHOLOGY IN COACHING

I am pleased that Jenkins made clear reference to the application of transpersonal psychology in coaching. I frequently urge all coaches who are likely to work at any level other than the most superficial with clients or groups to gain knowledge and experience of the use of transpersonal models that are so valuable, if not essential, when coaching more conscious and evolved people. These are the people who often seek coaching because they feel unfulfilled in their day job, and they want to have more meaning in what they do now, and also find more purpose to do what they will do in future. These are transpersonal issues and need to be facilitated by coaches or therapists who are knowledgeable and experienced in that area. This is entering the spiritual arena, and it raises the issue of whether that can be facilitated effectively by someone who has not yet addressed their own spirituality? The jury is out on that for me – but I doubt it.

Many universities do not yet even teach transpersonal psychology in their psychology departments and that is an absurd and irresponsible omission. In this area, coaches have something to teach academics for they are ahead of the game. Most eastern cultures do not separate the psychological and the spiritual along the developmental journey. If one works all over the world as I do, you will need to know this. The dividing line between the two in our western world is arbitrary and unreal, the product of scientific reductionism. The largest coaching organisations like the International Coach Federation (ICF) and the Association of Coaching (AC) will, I hope, soon list an understanding of the transpersonal as obligatory for their highest

coaching qualifications. If so, they will be showing universities the way. Of course such organisations can often move faster to change their qualifications or adopt new ideas, because they have less bureaucracy and do not have to wait for the results of research into the obvious.

SELF-DEVELOPMENT AND INTUITION

One particularly important point on this subject arises now and it is closely related to the transpersonal. When we work in any situation, but especially in dealing with people, the intuition can play an important role, and it does in coaching. There may be logical, linear or rational reasons for a coach to take a certain direction; either following the rules of coaching or the rules of psychology, but the coach intuitively takes a different route and it results in a breakthrough for the client. The rationalist will dismiss that, and say that it occurred by chance. On the contrary, I believe that as we go through our own self-development journey, we increase our reliance on our intuition, and I encourage coaches to do just that. Correct me if I am wrong, but in academic psychology the intuition does not exist because is not measurable or replicable.

THE GROW MODEL

Jenkins' paper refers to a number of maps and models from Maslow to the GROW model about which I will make some opening remarks before referring to GROW specifically. I emphasise that maps and models provide a lens through which one can explore a subject, but they are neither true, nor absolute, nor imperative. They are also over-simplifications which give them their accessibility to all, thereby making them more usable and useful. Jenkins states that Maslow's well known Hierarchy of Needs is far simpler than his original work and far simpler than the similar model, now called Spiral Dynamics, created by Clare Graves after painstakingly detailed research (see [1]).

In my work I attempt to limit my models to three stages, but no more than four whenever possible; for example: 'Dependence – Independence – Interdependence' (for personal development) [2]; Inclusion – Assertion – Cooperation (for teams) [3]; Need – Greed – Freedom (for everyone) [4]; and 'Forming – Storming – Norming – Performing' (for teams) [5]. Such minimalist models leave more space for discussion, learning is extended, and they also allow for additions. Contrary to what many think, I did not 'invent' the GROW model. GROW was actually first coined by Max Landsberg of McKinsey during a conversation about coaching with my then colleague Graham Alexander. We had been trying to find a 4-stage acronym for a while and that one just appeared in that conversation. It had little significance at the time, but then it caught on. It is, as I have stated before, not copyrighted, definitive, obligatory, exclusive or any of that; though another colleague, Alan Fine, later inappropriately but unsuccessfully laid claim to its exclusive use in the USA. However, I was the first to publish it in my book *Coaching for Performance* (1992), which then went on to become a best seller and coaching text book in many languages and countries [6]. Hence GROW became universal and was attributed to me.

In reality, though, GROW says nothing about coaching. Coaching is about raising awareness and responsibility. GROW is no more than a useful chronological

sequence for a coaching conversation that could equally be used in a command and control situation or for addressing an item in a Board meeting. In coaching, the only element of it that is not immediately obvious to the uninitiated is that the Goal comes before Reality. If people consider Reality first, they become drawn towards incremental remedial actions even with some negative connotations. Alternatively if the Goal is explored and established first, the action takes the form of how to get there from here and is orientated more towards the positive or the potential. Furthermore remedial actions may be attractive in the short term, but they may divert attention from the ultimate Goal.

CONCLUSION

As I stated above, I believe that Simon Jenkins' article and these comments between them will engender a serious debate about the role, relationship and responsibilities of coaching and academic psychology; not only 'locally', but in the troubled world today. How can we help to heal the dysfunctional people and institutions that have got us into this mess? We are all a part of the problem, and are therefore able to play a part in the solution.

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