

COACHING AND THE HUMAN SPIRIT

The beauty of everyday spirituality found in art, poetry and theatre brings wisdom to our coaching. **Simon Losasso** shares his experience.

‘Tools and toys are senses and spirit: behind them there yet lies the Self. The Self seeks with the eyes of the senses too, it listens with the ears of the spirit too... Behind your thoughts and feelings, my brother, stands a mighty sovereign, an unknown wise man – his name is Self.’ⁱ
Friedrich Nietzsche

The spirit, our disembodied essence, is the name we give to that otherness within us that renders us distinctively ourselves and, in moments of transcendent spirituality, connects us to all other human beings and the world. To experience it is to know it.

That rare delight: a warm, still, early summer’s evening in England. Shakespeare’s Globe theatre, London. *As You Like It*. The meticulously reconstructed 16th century surroundings, the small stage, the uncomfortable benches, the groundlings pressed forwards, only a few feet from the actors. Shakespeare’s limpid, compact verse.

Above, against a cloudless, azure sky, a shining jet makes its way to land at Heathrow airport and the tip of Renzo Piano’s masterpiece, the Shard, visible above the dome of the Globe, points its lightness upwards to infinity. The centuries meet.

A handsome, vigorous and rather self-satisfied Jaques delivers his famous ‘All the world’s a stage’ speech. At its close (having described the ‘*Last scene of all // That ends this strange eventful history, // Is second childishness and mere oblivion, // Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything*’) he smiles and takes a resounding bite out of the large, red apple he is holding and looks around triumphantly, as if daring all present – actors and public alike – to contradict him.

At that moment, I felt as connected to the players and first audiences of the play in 1600 as I did to the people around me in 2015. I was one and the same with all of them. Neither time nor mortality mattered. I was infused with a sense of harmonious universality. This state felt light and yet profound. I felt benevolent and compassionate, towards others and towards myself. It had the magic and the power of an epiphany. So why and how did it happen?

Possibly the experience of the theatre, compared to other forms of artistic expression, carries a peculiar, evocative power; we are confronted with our living selves. The empathetic leap of the imagination creates the spiritual link between the humanity represented before us and our own.

That said, pictorial art too can connect us to our deepest, shared humanity. A typically unforgiving self-portrait of Rembrandt in his maturity comes to mind. He allows himself no embellishments, the *chiaroscuro* illuminates each wrinkle, the skin is marked with age.

He looks a little battered, not in good health. Older than his 53 years at the time. Yet, in the unflinching representation of himself and his facial expression I discern a resigned, but defiant stoicism: ‘Yes, this is me, warts and all!’ he seems to say. His portrait reaches out to us across almost four centuries. It might have been painted yesterday.

The spirit then and the spiritual, in its secular sense, inform and animate our perception and contemplation of the universal. There is something marvelous and sublime in this process. Even the Webster dictionary tends towards poetic language to define the spirit: ‘the animating, or vital principle; that which gives life to the physical organism in contrast to its material elements; the breath of life.’

‘The breath of life.’ So, the spirit sits at our centre and animates (in modern Italian *anima* means soul) the whole. The concept of IQ arrived at the beginning of the 20th century. Daniel Goleman then introduced us to EQ at its end. At the beginning of this century research, backed by hard scientific evidence, has revealed the most fascinating twist of all: the existence of a spiritual intelligence (SQ).

‘The intelligence with which we address and solve problems of meaning and value, the intelligence with which we can place our actions and our lives in a wider, richer, meaning-giving context.’ⁱⁱ

How does all this pertain to coaching? Very much so, I would contend. Very recent research (for example that of Richard Boyatzis and Anthony Jack at Case Western University), has taken advantage of magnetic resonance imaging to suggest that coaching to the ‘positive emotional attractor’ (encouraging the client to envision their ideal work and life) activates ‘networks and regions of the brain that are associated with big-picture thinking, engagement, motivation, stress regulation, and parasympathetic modulation.’ⁱⁱⁱ It is but a brief step to invite the client to explore the fallout of that vision for those immediately around them: from personal contacts to humanity and the globe. There is profound spiritual reward in feeling and acting in adherence to personal ideals and vision with a view to contributing, even in a small way, to society as a whole.

Our VUCA world, and the largely complicit corporate space within it, can throw our deepest aspirations into sharp relief. The daily toil and toll of being where we feel we don’t want to be and living a life that does not satisfy our natural, spiritual longings may light the path to the entirely different future to which we aspire.

I once coached a client – I shall call her Morag – with a successful, well-paid, corporate career. Naturally a conscientious, hard worker, she was weary of being a ‘superwoman’ and wanted to direct her energy into ‘slowing down’ and leading a life that aligned with her deepest aspirations: a return to study and learning, in touch with nature, doing good that served a community. This aspiration took on a concrete form. She loved animals, and projecting herself into the future wanted to first study part-time and work in an animal therapy centre, with a view to one day opening such a centre herself. At first, I found the leap from corporate work to animal therapy astonishing. With reflection, some study and more coaching experience, I have become more aware that there is almost always a disparity between the life lived and the life desired. Part of this is healthy, but when the disparity is chasm-like the fallout can be existential.

Sir John Whitmore had a way of presenting complex concepts in straightforward language. Here he is making direct reference to that search for our identity, or spirit: ‘I sometimes say that the ultimate question – and there’s only one question in coaching

ultimately – is, who are you? [...] helping the person to find out who they are underneath the conditioning, the social obligations, the imposed religious imperatives, their own anxieties and defensive mechanisms. To me one could describe that as a spiritual quest or a personal development quest.’^{iv}

Jenny Rogers agrees: ‘Sooner or later in any substantial piece of coaching, one big question appears: “What’s my life purpose?”’^v

These two observations strike me as profoundly true. Coaching, among other definitions, might be described as an accompanied exploration of the self. How many Morags are struggling out there, not doing the jobs they aspire to, or marooned in unrewarding relationships, without precisely having understood or admitted to themselves where the problem lies? For some, that inner conflict remains unresolved. Their courage fails them, or circumstances impede their progress. Some are caught midstream, buffeted by the currents, the shore they seek not quite in clear view yet. It needs bringing into focus. These are the people coaches can really help.

Wisdom is seldom of the instant. We identify the connections retrospectively. Returning to where I began – that evening at the Globe – the presence of spiritual intelligence at work makes perfect, metaphysical sense. What happened cannot be explained by the intellect and the emotions alone. It was the imaginative workings of spirituality that gave the moment its peculiar, all-embracing resonance. At exactly that period in time I decided to study and become a coach, a decision underpinned by what I have since identified as my dominant value: the connection with others. I am not exactly sure where this path will take me. I am absolutely sure it is the right one.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Born and educated in the UK, Simon moved to Milan in 1981 and has been there ever since. A practicing coach since 2015, Simon worked many years in sales before finding his true passion in the learning and development space. He is currently a global talent consultant with healthcare provider Medtronic.

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