

Coaching Today

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the power of stories



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Editorial

Diane Parker

Editor, *Coaching Today*

As I write this I'm staring at the latest addition to my bookshelves – a secondhand hardback copy of Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.¹ In this seminal text, first published in 1949, Campbell explores the concept of the 'monomyth' or the Hero's Journey – a universal theme of transformation and adventure that can be found recurring in most of the world's myths and cultural traditions. Stories help us to make sense of who we are and our place in the world, both individually and collectively. I found this to be particularly true while writing my own contribution to our new 'Why I Became a Coach' series in this issue, and my reflections on why – and how – I was drawn to this profession have given me cause to pause and reflect on my journey so far. I also find myself curious about how this period of reflection might influence the trajectory of my journey in the future.

As Sue MacMillan writes in our cover feature on narrative coaching, 'Our brains are hardwired for stories... who we are and what we do are influenced by the stories we tell ourselves and the ways in which we narrate those experiences have an impact on how we feel and think, how we see ourselves and our relationships with others.' As coaches and coach-therapist practitioners, we are facilitators of stories, holding space for our clients as they explore and examine their own scripts and narratives, use them to make sense of who they are and their place in the world and fuel their journeys into the unknown.

But in reflecting on my own professional journey, I realise that stories also help us as practitioners in our own development, a notion reflected by Peter Wryczca in his follow-up contribution to *Coaching Today* on change and transformation. In this piece, Peter focuses on our development as practitioners, on our own change and transformation, and how that in turn impacts on our work with our clients. He writes, 'As we mature as coaches, our clients mature too.'



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We find them less interested in goal setting, problem solving and realising coaching outcomes, and more interested in the unfolding of who he or she can be.' As we reflect on our practice, we become less concerned with the what and the when, and more interested in the who, how and why. How did I get here? Who am I? And ultimately - where am I going?

This theme of unfolding narratives and journeys, exploring our own identities and relationships, is also reflected in our identity as an organisation, and our place in the wider world of the profession. Who are we - and who do we represent? Within coaching, the coach-therapy profession is still gaining ground, but as our Chair Gill Fennings-Monkman narrates in her regular column, exciting developments are taking place, alliances and collaborations are forming and, while there is much work still to be done, there is also much to celebrate. This is also reflected here in our journal: as we examine our own narratives and explore how the past has shaped our identity, we gain understanding of our present and clarity about where we are going in the future, and where we want to be.

We launch another new series in this issue - the new 'Opinion' column. I hope both will facilitate further discussion, debate and storytelling among you. We want to hear your voices, your opinions, your narratives. I have reflected on my own journey here because I am curious about yours. As editor of this journal for the past three years, I have realised how increasingly diverse this profession of ours is. While we won't always agree, there is always the potential for common ground. I want to represent and celebrate both our differences and our similarities - the collective monomyth to be found in our individual stories.

The personal is universal. Let's pause to take stock, celebrate our successes - and continue on our journey.



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Me, myself and I: how to use self to maximum effect in coaching

Independent coach **Julie J Allan** describes how her learning, research and reflective practice led to the development of her own coaching model, helping practitioners maximise the use of self in coaching.



I first received coach training while working as a line manager in financial services. Later, as a board-level director in the passenger transport, legal and water industries, I underwent further coach training and frequently used coaching and team coaching in my role before becoming a self-employed coach.

Throughout my training I was never formally introduced to the concept of the 'use of self' in coaching, but I instinctively knew that, as coach, all that I am, all that I bring and all that I do had to be central to the coaching relationship and its outcomes. When I read that use of self is 'the most powerful instrument of change',¹ this felt undeniably true. I was desperate to learn more. But how could I learn to practise this skill well, and what development would enable this? How should I go about it? I was enthused, excited, confused and frustrated; my research didn't answer these questions or inform my self-development and practice. My desire to learn and the lack of practical answers led me to research thoroughly. I sought information and guidance from other coaches, supervision, coach practice sessions within European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) EQA coach education programmes, academic studies (writing an assignment on use of self), my tutors, therapists, clients, my own tutoring, being coached, books, articles and reflective practice.

I learned that use of self involves putting our best intentions and best self into creating a new state. We choose what we do with our perceptions, taking intentional actions that make an impact in and on the world and enable change (self being the instrument of change). I realised the importance of the changing nature of self in relationship, improved self-awareness and the ability to intentionally choose/flex my presence. Bluckert² suggests choosing how to 'show up', O'Neill³ proposes we understand, cultivate and use a presence true to our 'signature style' with intent, and Rainey, Tolbert and Hanafin⁴ suggest we stretch our self and coachees by consciously displaying 'weirdness' of presence. Barnett⁵ says deciding what aspect of self to disclose is important and Arloski⁶ provides ethical insight by highlighting the dangers of poorly timed, self-serving, under-used or persuasion-motivated use of self. This fired my curiosity, but still I found little guidance on *how* to improve self-awareness, develop my skills and practise a wider range of presence ethically and to my best ability. Increased awareness of my self was vital, but how to achieve this?

Knowing and noticing my 'default' sense of self, and when and how it altered in relationship, was the start of and core to the answer.

Awareness

In my confusion over how to raise my self-awareness, I sought feedback from diverse sources – from friends, family, clients and colleagues (current and historical) – on my self, my presence and impact. This made conscious my 'normal' (default) self, allowing me to notice when something different was present, giving me conscious choice to share this and/or use different ways of being within my use of self. 'Checking in' with myself before each session raised my awareness of my state, further enhancing my ability to notice changes. Feedback showed that I already unconsciously display different parts of myself and ways of being in different contexts with different people, so I already knew how to flex my presence; doing so *consciously* was the next step. I realised that my authenticity, and how true to myself (or how distant) I am from this, are key to how I feel, how powerful I am and how much of my presence and impact I can own and use. I gave this serious consideration. Some of my learning about myself was far from comfortable. I heard views and opinions about myself, my presence and my impact that were unpalatable or unpleasant. So how could I integrate disowned or disallowed parts of myself?

I used many different tools to consider my self, including Myers-Briggs (MBTI), body work, supervision, feedback from others, Enneagram⁷ and emotional intelligence (EI) models.⁸ I learned



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to consciously choose models that appealed to me, as well as those that did not; to stretch myself and my learning further. My 'try anything' approach (born from not knowing what to do) inadvertently led to learning that using as many and diverse as possible models adds value.

My reflective practice skills also improved. I became more conscious of my learning style preferences⁹ and ensured that my reflective practice covered all four stages of Kolb's learning cycle.¹⁰ Initially this required conscious bias towards the least preferred parts. This was difficult and irritating, yet yielded brilliant results. Gilbert's¹¹ 'intellectual disharmony' and Hill's¹² 'creative abrasion' perfectly describe the confusion, contradictions, complexity and angst I endured, which fuelled and improved my learning. Accepting and embracing this angst, confusion, paradox and the sometimes simultaneous truth of opposites are key to great reflective practice and learning, and integral to my model (especially in relation to increasing self-awareness).

Whole self

How to develop and use my whole self came next, as a result of reflections on feedback I received about disallowed parts of myself. My discomfort and confusion drove me to seek to understand and accept more/all of myself. Parts work enabled this: considering the disowned/disallowed parts of myself, and working with a therapist and supervisor to re-integrate these. I realised that the best use of self comes when we acknowledge, accept and use all that we are – not only the likeable parts. Self-acceptance was empowering and transformative. I now practise befriending my whole self, which is key to skilful use of self with the widest range of ways of being, and to role modelling self-acceptance.

Self-compassion literature and practices helped me own/accept more parts of myself without needing to change/improve these. Paradoxically, this led to effortless, lasting change. Self-work via emotional intelligence,¹³ self-awareness and self-management balanced my self-view. Siebert's¹⁴ work on resilience (three 'inner selves': self-confidence, self-esteem and self-concept) enabled a clearer sense of myself.

My self-development was optimised by using multiple, varied models and working with coaches, supervisors and therapists with as different as possible a background, style, presence and preferences to my own. Developing whole-self-awareness is a life-long journey. We always (and can only) start from where we are. By embracing this, the path opens up in front of us. →

Figure 1: the AWE STAR model

A	AWARENESS OF SELF increases exponentially
W	WHOLE SELF is developed, integrated and used in coach practice
E	EXTENDED RANGE of presence is enabled and consciously chosen Enacted/enabled via
S	SKILL (how to use self well)
T	TRUST (instinctive, not solely cerebral)
A	AUTHENTICITY (true to self)
R	RESPECT (for coachee, self, diversity, ethics and professionalism)

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Extended range of presence

Extending my range of presence was one of my original aims. This was enabled via knowing who I am. Paradoxically, the clearer I got about my sense of self, self-confidence and self-esteem (and my signature style, values, what I 'stand for'), the more capable I became of consciously using a broader range of presence while staying true to myself. Self-acceptance and development of the transcendent self (beyond ego and attachment to outcomes) enabled a lighter touch, maximum range and magical outcomes. The Three Principles,¹⁵ the Enneagram and other spiritual models proved useful. I learned that becoming aware of and consciously choosing the specific presence that will most benefit the coachee and their goals (even when this is different to my default style) can happen easily. Improving whole-self-awareness is the prerequisite to this.

Development of model

I concluded that there are practical steps that improve awareness of and use of self, enhancing coach practice, client satisfaction and performance improvement. This learning led to the development of my AWE STAR model (Figure 1), which seeks to answer these questions and signposts how to develop and ethically practise this highest order coaching skill.

I realised retrospectively that my journey and AWE model are sequential: **A**wareness of self is a prerequisite of and enables use of the **W**hole self, which in turn is a prerequisite of and enables using the fullest **E**xtended range of presence = **A** → **W** → **E**.

Skills

I knew specific skills underpin/enable good use of self, but not how to develop/practise these skills or *what* this entailed. My desire to know this caused me to notice, reflect on and learn from as many sources as possible. The **STAR** part of my model is the result. My reflective practice (and mistakes such as overly-strong use of self and attachment to outcomes) showed that interventions made lightly/offered politely work best – and if these are refused or inaccurate, this is OK and best left. I accepted that not all use of self interventions will 'land' or be useful. This provides an opportunity for reflection, learning and skills improvement. I now state explicitly when I'm saying something that I notice in myself: and ask whether this means anything to/ evokes anything in the coachee. I notice, see and say what is – in the moment – in a permission-giving, validating, empowering, enabling manner. The kind of phrases that work well for me are: 'Can I share what I'm noticing in myself, and see if it means anything to you?' or 'I notice that I feel _____ as I listen. How does that resonate?' Learning from previous heaviness/clunkiness in my practice informed this lightness. The intent is soul-to-soul, human-to-human connection, without judgment. I've learned (from supervision reflecting on a coaching relationship with strong transference and countertransference within it) that being alert to transference and countertransference (and understanding these and regulating my own emotions to navigate them) aid skilful use of self. When using self, I now ask questions rather than making statements; in Gestalt style, I observe rather

than interpret, allowing the coachee to 'make meaning' (or not) of my use of self for themselves.

I learned that a wider range of creative interventions enables the coachee to connect with my use of self observations – I seek their feelings, body senses, and use art, body work, metaphor etc. I choose tools that the coachee resonates with or chooses, while being challenging enough to enable stretch in this choice. Supervision on the initial resistance of a coachee to body work (which I offered again more strongly, she then chose to undertake, and found 'invaluable') enabled this learning. It took self-doubt and questioning to check in (with myself, my supervisor and coachee) whether I had pushed too hard. We all concluded I had not, and the strength of my offering enabled the coachee to go beyond her comfort zone, make a shift and gain value.

I realised that senses or thoughts that repeatedly present themselves can be important and valuable, and that it is not necessary, helpful or ethical to disclose all changes in my awareness. I choose what to disclose, depending on whether it serves the coachee/their goals. Learning from mistakes enabled this – it was hard to accept that some of my changed senses were about me, and were not useful (especially if offered too strongly). I found that being curious and open, beyond any beliefs, ideas or agendas, helped, as did reflection on whether I challenge too much, sufficiently or not enough. I've found that bravery (with respect and permission-seeking) enables change and learning, and that zero-effort, natural skill works best. Being aware of my own psychological and emotional state enables me to take care not to bring this forward in the service of my own needs but to notice and use only that which in myself relates to the coachee's needs.

I've learned that change occurs when the coachee is able to be and stay in contact (Gestalt) with their heightened feelings in themselves and between them and me. My ability to stay with intense emotions enables me to role model this with coachees, creating and holding the safe space where change and growth occur. Noticing, stating and enabling the coachee to be aware of,



stay with, make meaning of and gain maximum value from their 'felt shift' are key.

Central to my learning, model and use of self is acceptance of my uniqueness – and bringing that to my practice. I can only use self well by knowing, owning, being and using all that I am. Only I can use self well in my own unique way, just as every other coach can only use self well in their unique way. I had to surpass my fear that embracing my powerful uniqueness was arrogant or disrespectful. Fully embracing this freed me to be the best that I can be, releasing me from the temptation to seek only to emulate other (more experienced) coaches in using self. (Which is ironic, because how could I possibly emulate the use of self of another? The only self I have is my own.)

Trust

Learning to trust my instincts, beyond the cerebral, and knowing I will notice and appropriately disclose what is important have been difficult and productive. I now trust that senses that repeatedly and forcibly come to my attention merit possible disclosure, as do feelings that grow stronger, remain, repeat or won't be denied. I consciously build a relationship that is trusting, supportive and in service of the coachee's goals, and ensure that we both feel/ know this.

My least effort-full (natural, effortless, 'in the flow') interventions are often the most effective. 'Trying' to use self well inhibits my innate skill. A fellow coach observed that I 'lost' myself when I tried too hard. Mindfulness practice helped hone the calm, present-moment awareness that enables such interventions. Magical interventions occur when I use my whole self in service of my coachees, acting bravely, ethically, professionally and with great care, compassion, respect, kindness, gentleness and strength. I've learned to trust in my innate, inherent wisdom and capability and that of my coachees – this is fundamental to good use of self.

Authenticity

I have learned to maintain authenticity/stay true to myself by knowing who I am and learning which parts of myself I can flex (even dramatically) and which other parts of myself

are vital to my core self-concept and which I therefore should not flex. Flexing those parts of myself that are vital to my core self-concept runs the risk of creating dissonance at best and distress at the worst. This was a slow and painful lesson that I learned with difficulty, but which became an invaluable insight that I will never lose. Initially, I anticipated that limitless flex might be possible and desirable, but my view on this changed as my understanding of myself and my model deepened. Staying true to oneself does necessitate some boundaries where flex is neither desirable nor productive.

Respect

I learned that always showing respect for the coachee, myself, diversity, ethics and professionalism is important. I treat coachees with 'positive affectionate regard', and explicitly state this to bring it into awareness.

AWE STAR is intended to help coaches learn to improve whole-self-awareness and use this in practice. The **AWE** part is sequential: **A** enables and pre-cursors **W**, which in turn enables and pre-cursors **E**. This can result in lasting change, enabling our clients to be all that they have the inherent capability to be. My self, self-awareness, use of self and model all continue to evolve.

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