THE LONE RANGER IS DYING:
Gestalt Coaching As Support And Challenge

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Awareness, Immediacy, and Intimacy: The Experience of Coaching as Heard in the Voices of Gestalt Coaches and their Clients

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*I think no human being can give more than this. Making life possible for the Other, if only for a moment. Permission.* –Martin Buber

This study has its origins in lively conversations about coaching between Gestalt psychotherapists, organizational consultants, and coaches at the Gestalt Therapy Institute of Philadelphia (GTIP), the New York Institute of Gestalt Therapy (NYIGT), and the Gestalt International Study Center (GISC). What is coaching? What is Gestalt coaching? How is coaching different from psychotherapy? One frequent question concerns whether coaching, with its emphasis on reaching goals through action, is at odds with the Gestalt approach to therapy. Joel Latner explains, “The point of therapy is not to make solutions, it is to make the problem-laden present more actual, by increasing the patient’s awareness. The therapy cannot be focused directly to solutions” (1974, p. 211).

On the other hand, coaches who work in organizations rush to distinguish coaching from therapy; they fear people will confuse the two. Many can rattle off a series of differences. Therapy is based on the past; coaching is about the future. Therapy is for sick people who want to restore health; coaching is for those who are healthy and want to develop their potential. The goals in therapy are often amorphous and the process is a journey with a life of its own; the goals in coaching are specific, measurable, actionable, results, to be achieved in time (SMART); its process has clear phases and steps laid out for the client at the start.

On both sides, some talk about the boundary between therapy and coaching as if a barricade like the Berlin wall were between them. Based on our experience, the border is more like a Chinese screen we can easily pick up and move, depending on the best kind of space for the client(s) with whom we are working at the moment, as well as the limits of our competencies. Then again, we are boundary spanners. Mark’s practice includes psychotherapy, organizational consulting, and coaching. In addition, he is on the faculty of the Gestalt Therapy Institute of Philadelphia (GTIP) and is a member of the Next Generation of the Gestalt International Study Center (GISC). Martin’s work consists of consulting on organization development, teaching research methods to PhD students in organization and management, and coaching. While he coaches individuals, most coaching work is with groups. He is entering his third year in GTIP’s training program. Both are members of the New Hope Gestalt Café, a

group of 10 psychotherapists and OD consultants that has been meeting monthly for 4+ years at the home of Mark Magerman and Debra Brosan.

We wondered what was happening with others in the field and what fieldwork might reveal.

**APPROACH**

We set out to understand the lived experience of coaching as expressed by Gestalt coaches and their clients in personal interviews.

**An Exploratory Design**

We did not begin with a conceptual framework. We were interested in exploring rather than testing or confirming ideas. We came to the project with a few orienting ideas. We brought ourselves, our backgrounds, our professions, our interests, and our life experiences. We knew some of the conceptual bins related to coaching (goals, coaching versus psychotherapy, relationship, awareness, presence, dialogue, holism, contact, contract, etc.) and what would likely be in those containers, but we did not set out with those conceptual categories or ideas of the relationships between them as the framework to bind the study. We wanted to hold pre-structured designs to a minimum to be in harmony with Gestalt principles. We wanted to be present, in the moment, to meet coaches and clients and to allow a dialogue to emerge.

We chose not to review the coaching literature before beginning our interviews. We were not interested in hearing people talk *about* theories, processes, models, skills, or state of the profession. We wanted to get as close as possible to the experience through first-hand accounts.

**Research Questions**

These were our guiding questions. What is the experience of coaching and of being coached? What does successful coaching look like? Is Gestalt coaching different from other approaches to coaching?

**Participants**

Rather than restricting the study to executive coaching, we chose coaches of all kinds. We identified coaches by networking in the Gestalt community; each coach then found a client willing to be interviewed. These participants included Susan Gregory, a singing coach/Gestalt therapist and her client, Rebecca Dietzel, an anatomist who specializes in biochemistry; Nathaniel Mills, PhD, a counseling psychologist/Gestalt coach who is a dating coach and his client, Jim Matson, a software programmer and aspiring writer; Mary Anne Walk, an executive coach who has done significant training in both coaching and Gestalt, and her client, O. Redia Anderson, a former chief diversity officer turned coach who herself is certified from two coach training programs; and finally, two actors, George Dicenzo, also an acting coach who studied with Fritz Perls at Esalen and Tony Roberts, who has been coached in acting by a number of famous acting teachers.
Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews were semi-structured, freeform, audio-taped conversations ranging from 45 to 90 minutes, conducted either in person or on the telephone. One day in New York, we started at Susan Gregory’s Chinatown apartment where we listened carefully over the din of construction. Next, we went to Tony Roberts’ Upper East Side apartment where two actors, Tony and George DiCenzo, old friends playing off one another as they told very funny stories, entertained us. Woody Allen, leaving a message on the answering machine, interrupted the interview. We spent three hours that night in George DiCenzo’s acting class at Actor’s Playhouse in the Village. One student at a time took the stage and performed; seven students worked that night. We sat in the audience, along with 20+ acting students, witnessed a performance, and then heard George, sitting orchestra front row center, offer feedback based on his experience of the performance and the actor. One student did a scene from a play set in Nazi Germany. A brick crashes through the front window of her home; she then delivers a monologue telling us about her engagement to a Jewish man. We were impressed with her technical skills as an actor. George simply said, “Go pick up that brick. Look at that brick in your hand. Look at it. Don’t you have a feeling about that? What are you feeling right now?” She spoke about the feelings bubbling up in her at the moment: slowly, tentatively at first; George simply listened. Quickly, it was as if a dam were breached, to burst open and set free a torrent of conflicting emotions. George responded: “Do the scene.” We witnessed a transformation. The performance was breathtaking; the change was stunning.

We had a guiding set of interview questions for coaches and another for clients, but these served more like checklists of things to cover than as a strict protocol. We had professional transcriptions created, except in one case where we transcribed the interview ourselves. Listening to the recordings and correcting these transcriptions was the first step of immersing ourselves in the data.

Rather than beginning with the conventional analytic approach of word-by-word, line-by-line isolation of significant segments, assigning meaning, creating names for them, and then looking for patterns, the first phase of data analysis involved a search for patterns. Each read the transcriptions, looking for what was figural, with this guiding question: What is going on here? We approached the texts with what one researcher called a squinty-eyed view rather than the intense gaze of the analyst. As we read these texts, we made notes or sketched ideas that might contribute later to a theoretical explanation, were simply things that required exploration with the other, or captured what we were aware of in the moment as we read the texts. Next, we met and shared what was figural for each of us, and those words, phrases, or paragraphs representing that interest.

Our choices had an uncanny convergence. For example, a page or two of text might not capture the interest of either, and then both of us selected the same word or phrase. We explored and negotiated the meaning of the selected portions of text. We created pattern codes. We did have a significant disagreement concerning the naming of one category, and neither was willing to give up his preferred name. A talk by Laura Perls (1978) resolved the impasse. It did not have to be either this or that; Laura actually coupled each of our labels to describe an important domain in Gestalt therapy. This is discussed below. We then jointly analyzed each text together, word-by-word, line-by-line, to test the pattern codes, to label meaning units, and to capture material that did not fit any of our codes. Clear
themes emerged. In the process of our face-to-face coding of the texts, we explored possible relationships among categories. Often a meaningful segment did not fit separately into the exclusive domain of one category; segments often represented two, three, or more categories.

Given this laborious process, the line-by-line analysis required days of face-to-face time. During this phase, in the course of lengthy discussions about possible relationships among categories and alternative explanations of the experience, we created data displays, ultimately resulting in an analytic framework that we concluded represented the experience of coaching, as told to us by coaches and their clients. That conceptual framework appears later in this article.

THE PERSONS AND THEIR SITUATIONS

Coaching originates with a particular person in a specific situation who senses a need, problem, opportunity, urge, drive, or even some vague sense of dissatisfaction. This sense can be self-generated or other-generated, such as a request from a boss.

What follows are anecdotes from the coaches and clients concerning their situations and initial contact with coaches. Later on, we offer anecdotes about their experiences of coaching and about how they made sense of those experiences. Max van Manen suggests anecdotes serve several functions in human science.

An historical account describes a thing that happened in the past but an anecdote is rather like a poetic narrative which describes a universal truth....

Anecdotes form a concrete counterweight to abstract theoretical thought....

Anecdotes express a certain disdain for the alienated and alienating discourse of scholars who have difficulty showing how life and theoretical propositions are connected....

Anecdotes may provide an account of certain teachings or doctrines which were never written down....

Anecdotes may be encountered as concrete demonstrations of wisdom, sensitive insight, and proverbial truth....

Anecdotes of a certain event or incident acquire the significance of exemplary character.

The paradoxical thing about anecdotal narrative is that it tells something particular while really addressing the general or universal. (Van Manen, 1990, pp. 119-120, italics original)

Our intent in the parallel display of these anecdotes is to invite you to explore similarities. We found correspondence in each and intrigue in what might be in the space between.
Jim Matson (Client) & Nathaniel Mills, Ph.D. (Coach)

Jim had lived in the Philadelphia area since 1990 when he relocated from his hometown of Minneapolis. A computer programmer in corporate America since 1989 and a bass guitarist for "The Bughunters," a classic rock and blues band for 18 years, he had recently begun cultivating his affinity for writing—prose, poetry, short stories. He wanted to further develop his writing voice and find more outlets to inspire and be inspired with creative writing and art.

Nathaniel Mills was a psychotherapist, life coach, and group facilitator specializing in dating and relationships. Nathaniel received his Ph.D. in Counseling Psychology from Lehigh University in May 2009, an M.Ed. in Counseling and Human Services from Lehigh University, and a Certificate in the Art of Gestalt Coaching from the Gestalt Therapy Institute of Philadelphia. He had worked with CEOs, entertainers, and college students alike, helping thousands of clients find more fulfilling relationships through personal development.

Well, I didn't actually initially intend to seek out coaching. Actually, on meetup.com, there was what looked like it was a workshop. It was guys getting together with the intention of how to better attract women and approach and interact with them.

I did some research and thought, "Well, this could be a bunch of flakes, or a bunch of whatever, or it could just be interesting fun, or who knows." But I was in a place of transition and really looking at doing new things, so I checked it out. What the afternoon event turned out to be was Nathaniel Mills, giving a seminar, a holistic approach to dating.

When I actually met with him and the group of people that were there, all of my assumptions were blown away. It wasn't about, "Oh, how to pick up women" and different techniques. It was about looking inside and kind of actually, holistically looking at the different parts of your life and who you are and what you're presenting versus what it is you're looking to do.

So that's how I got introduced to Nathaniel, and just stayed in touch with him from that point forward. Yeah, just the concepts and what I actually saw happening; it just really rang true with me. He introduced the coaching part and that

I had an interest in it [Gestalt therapy] when I was an undergrad after watching the "Gloria" tapes. I was blown away at how profoundly intense Fritz Perls was, but I didn't know anything about the theory or the substance of the practice. I guess at grad school, in a program that was primarily cognitive behavioral with some psychodynamic underpinnings, I found that to be thoroughly unacceptable for what I wanted to be able to give clients. I wanted to be able to give clients a very holistic experience where their emotions, bodies, and minds and spirits were all addressed in an inclusive, tangible way. I still felt very constrained with cognitive behavioral therapy.... And too constrained within psychodynamic therapy to be able to include the body. I was actively searching for a more holistic way of addressing a person's experience.

Actually, after doing some basic reading on Gestalt therapy, I had the pleasure of meeting you, Mark. And after our very brief encounter in that advanced counseling techniques course [Lehigh University] that you had come and guest lectured at, I was just very, very inspired at your intensity--almost the inclusiveness that it fostered. And I think that's an inclusiveness that is very, very unique to Gestalt therapy...a full humanistic acceptance of somebody, their mind and their body, and to have that inclusiveness be made
seemed like something that just definitely held an interest for me. That's how I initially got in touch with coaching or introduced to it and with Nathaniel...

Neither Jim nor Nathaniel was actively seeking a coach. Jim was at a place in life where he wanted to meet a woman and establish a long-term relationship. Nathaniel found himself in a situation where he was not satisfied with his doctoral education and wanted to learn how to serve clients better. Each came in contact with a coach and felt a strong sense of connection to that person. The relational genesis of coaching was something we heard from most of the eight people interviewed.

**O. Redia Anderson (Client) & Mary Anne Walk (Coach)**

Redia Anderson was the Managing Partner of Anderson People Strategies, LLC, a management consulting and executive coaching firm committed to talent optimization and leadership excellence. Nationally recognized as a leader in the field of diversity and inclusion, Redia was a senior executive with more than 25 years of experience in human resources and diversity management. Her expertise included years of steadily increasing responsibility, primarily as a chief diversity officer, across industry leading organizations recognized for their management depth and leadership strength: Deloitte & Touche USA, LLP; Equiva Services (joint venture between Shell, Texaco, and Saudi Aramco); Sears, Roebuck & Co.; and Abbott Laboratories. Redia had also worked as a special agent in the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s white-collar crime and organized crime units. She held a graduate degree in clinical psychology from Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas.

Mary Anne Walk was the President of WALK & Associates, a professional group with expertise in three primary areas: executive coaching, corporate strategy design, and alignment of people with business goals. Prior to launching her own business, she spent approximately 35 years at AT&T, retiring as the Vice President of Human Resources and then became the executive vice president for a software company creating strategic workforce solutions. She worked on several boards and was a member of the staff at the Gestalt International Study Center. Mary Anne was a summa cum laude graduate of Tarkio College, and held an MBA in Marketing from Fairleigh Dickinson University and an M.S. in Management Science from MIT as a Sloan Fellow. She was certified as a Master Coach from the International Coach Federation.

**Redia**

I am in the process of completing my coaching certification. This one (Hudson Institute) will be my second. I have another from Coach U.

One program requirement is that we be coached. We have to know what it’s like to be on the receiving end. That was the impetus behind me

**Mary Anne**

I was a senior executive at AT&T. They were developing me to be the chief negotiator for AT&T. They asked the executive training people to find a program for me that would help me learn how to make decisions more from my head than from my gut. They found this new international OSD program about systems dynamics, the 18-month
looking to establish a coaching relationship. We have a 15, 16-hour requirement of being coached and a requirement to provide coaching.

I had been in conversation with some other coaches and Mary Anne's name came up. I was looking for someone who had a business background and experience working as an executive in a corporate environment; someone quick on the uptake, sharp, accustomed to getting points across at a pretty good clip, who had a really strong business background.... Someone who kind of mirrored what my background was and was like the kinds of people I would coach.

I also felt that we needed to click...have some repartee between us, an ease of conversation, a sense that this person had been in my shoes, and would help me look at how I might shift certain behaviors that would make me more effective.

I also had a third requirement: I am an entrepreneur now. This is kind of a mid-career, mid-life change for me, having been in a corporation for about 20-plus years and then a partnership for about seven or so of those years. I wanted to use more of my experiences more holistically in coaching.

And, in speaking with Mary Anne, you know how easy she is to talk with and connect to, so it was easy. I selected her because I felt she met my needs.

Redia and Mary Anne were asked by others to seek coaching. In both cases, the purpose was professional development. Redia moved to a new career in coaching as a way to tap into, build on, and integrate knowledge from 20+ years of experience in the corporate world. Mary Anne had been coaching employees for many years in her role as an executive at AT&T. The organization wanted her to complement her natural abilities and experiential learning with what they thought of as more rigorous thinking and a systematic approach.

Rebecca Dietzel (Client) & Susan Gregory (Coach)

Rebecca Dietzel, M.S., was an anatomist who specialized in biochemistry. She maintained private practices in New York City and Vermont, teaching anatomy, physical re-education, and nutrition. Rebecca also taught anatomy and kinesiology for the Ailey/Fordham BFA program. She received her Master of Science from Columbia University's Institute of Human Nutrition. She is also an Ayurvedic international program. They thought it would take me more into my head than into my gut.

It met five, maybe six, times over 18 months. We'd come together and work and then we'd go apart. We had study groups and come back together, and go apart, and have study groups, and come back together, et cetera, et cetera.

The whole thing was about learning how to trust your intuition, which was really supporting what I had always done, and done well. So, the reason that I went was actually very different than the outcome that I took away.

That's how I came to be introduced to Gestalt initially, back in 1992, maybe 1993. It is funny, because that was the first time that I had met Edwin Nevis, Jonno Hanafin, and Claire Stratford, and that group. And I have been heavily engaged with the whole Center and programs ever since, and have taken many of the programs.

Susan Gregory was a Gestalt private practitioner who also teaches singing and the Gindler approach to breath and body work. At the time of the interview, she was President of the New York Institute for Gestalt Therapy. Susan had taught Gestalt therapy theory and praxis in Australia, New Zealand, England, Argentina, and Brazil and given workshops in many cities including Amsterdam, Antwerp, Athens, Rome, Montreal, San Francisco, and New Orleans. Her articles had been published in the International Gestalt Journal, British Gestalt Journal, Australian Gestalt Journal, Cahiers de Gestalt, the Swiss Gestalt Journal, and Classical Singer Magazine. Susan was a recital artist and was previously a soloist with the New York City Opera, finalist with the Metropolitan Opera Competition, and gold medal winner at Concorso G. B. Viotti in Vercelli, Italy.

Rebecca

It was just one of those, "Gee, I'd really like to take voice lessons" kind of impulses. You know, I'm not a professional actress or anything like that, so I didn't really have a professional need to change or improve my voice in any way.

It's something that popped into my head that I thought I'd like to do. And then I met Susan and heard that she was a voice teacher. There was also that motivation: "Oh, this is the person that I want to study with." I wasn't actively looking for a voice teacher. It just seemed the perfect fit. Yeah.

I had actually taken voice lessons in the late 80s when I had first moved to New York, when I was a professional dancer. And I went to this very famous voice teacher who turned out to be a complete nut [laughter]. It's like: "Oh, great, all voice teachers are like, these wacky women who wear these big, flowing caftans and have little dogs that sit in their lap at the piano." Well, that is not for me, especially when I'm paying for it. Obviously, you know, Susan is not one of those.

She was someone who would really respect my time. Here's one hour out of my life that I'm committing to being with you and I want that hour to be respected and I want productive and amazing things to happen in that hour.

Susan

The thing which has more influenced [my coaching] is the bodywork that I studied for over 30 years with Carola Speads. Carola was a teaching assistant of Elsa Gindler in Berlin. That was my first training; it is understanding how people function from their toes up. She was such a fine teacher. That’s where I learned how to be a teacher.

When I came to my first meeting of the New York Institute, I wasn't yet a trainee. I understood every single thing everyone was saying. I kept saying: “How could I know this?” After about two hours, I said, “It's Carola’s language.” I went on a five-year research to find how it could be that Gestalt descriptions of human experience were the same descriptions I was learning in my bodywork classes. I discovered two connections: one was that Laura Perls was a student of Elsa Gindler in Berlin. And Fritz did some work with another person who had studied with Gindler, Charlotte Selver. So both Fritz and Laura were influenced by Gindler ‘s work. So it is the Gindler work that underlies my work as a singing teacher.

However, Gestalt therapy gave me the language to talk with people. The Gindler work is largely id functioning work, so there is not a lot of language. It is all experiential and I didn't find that sufficient for helping a person. Gestalt therapy gave me gentle ways to talk to people about what they are experiencing and to understand the levels, the
layers of what they are saying to me.

So, it was meeting Susan that led Rebecca into coaching. The client found a coach who would respect her, her time, and expectations. As we listened to Susan, she referred to “Carola” as frequently as she did the word “bodywork.” In the interviews, respect, appreciation, and affection for the teacher-coaches colored their words: “Oh, this is the person I want to study with.” Susan’s experience with bodywork preceded knowledge of a language and theory to validate the experience, enable her to talk about it, and extend her ability to help others. Bodily experience comes first; language and understanding follow: start at the toes and work “up” to the mind.

Tony Roberts (Actor/Client) & George DiCenzo (Actor & Coach)

George DiCenzo trained with Fritz Perls at Esalen. He had studied and taught acting for almost 40 years and he had come to one important conclusion. He couldn't teach acting—because it couldn't be taught. He could teach about life. He could show an artist with the talent and with the determination to succeed in the most difficult field how to throw off the cloaks of inhibition and fear of judgment that plague all actors. He could nurture the creative gift within an actor by providing a safe space to conquer the voices that say, “No, you can't” and free the spirit that deeply and truly understands, “Yes, I can.” He could show an actor that to strip down to one’s raw and primal self may be difficult and frightening, but is ultimately freeing. And George knew that the free expression of this vulnerable “self” defines the essence of an actor. George left Yale University with an MFA in acting and spent the next 40+ years acting, directing, teaching, and thereby learning what acting was all about.

He had appeared in over 50 major motion pictures, including Helter/Skelter, Close Encounters of the Third Kind, and Back to the Future. He had been a frequent guest star on network television (Law & Order, Judging Amy, NYPD Blue, and Murder, She Wrote, among others), as well as having starred in his own network television series, Equal Justice and Joe’s Life. He had appeared frequently on the Broadway stage in On Borrowed Time with Nathan Lane, directed by his longtime friend, George C. Scott. He had done voiceovers for commercials, cartoons, and video games. For the past 10 years, George had taught and coached actors, directors, writers, and singers in New York, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia. Burt Reynolds referred to George as “the best acting teacher in America” during his appearance on BRAVO’s Inside the Actors Studio. George coached some of Broadway's and Hollywood's best actors and entertainers (and a few CEOs), including Nathan Lane, Colin Farrell, Burt Reynolds, Phish’s lead singer Trey Anastasio, Brad Garrett, and many others who choose to remain anonymous.

Tony Roberts starred on Broadway in The Tale of the Allergists Wife, Victor, Victoria, Cabaret, The Sisters Rosensweig, They’re Playing Our Song, Jerome Robbins’ Broadway, Sugar, How Now, Dow Jones, Promises, Promises, Play It Again Same, and more than a dozen others. He received two Tony Award nominations and was the winner of the Critics Poll Award for his performance of Promises, Promises in London. He also starred in both the original and the recent Broadway revival of Barefoot in the Park. His versatility was on display at Madison Square Garden where he played Scrooge, as well as in the New York City Opera productions of Brigadoon and South Pacific. He can be seen on screen in Annie Hall, Play it Again, Sam, Serpico, The Taking of Pelham, Amityville 3D, Radio Days, 18 Again, Star
Spangled Girl, Switch, and many others. His television work includes Arthur Miller’s The American Clock, Saul Bellows Seize the Day, The Carol Burnett Show, and his own series for NBC, Rosetti & Ryan. Tony Roberts recorded more than 50 audio books, including the popular Stuart Woods detective series featuring Stone Barrington. He won an Audio Book Award for Rudolph Giuliani’s Leadership, and recently starred in the first revival of Samuel Beckett’s Endgame at The Irish Repertory Company in New York City. He attended the High School of Music & Art in Manhattan and Northwestern University, where he studied acting with Alvina Krause.

Tony Roberts

I have a story with [Sanford] Meisner. I went to see Meisner when I was 22 years old, ...when I was on Broadway at the time and he was interviewing new students for his school that he was opening on 23rd Street: American Musical Theater or something like that. I sat down and we started talking. I said, “Mr. Meisner, I want to study with you. I just graduated Northwestern University and I studied with Alvina Krause.” I had a meeting with Strasburg when I was like 17 or 18 years old. I said, “What do you think about Alvina Krause”? Strasberg replied: “She’s the best teacher in the country.”

So, I sit with Meisner and said, “I studied for four years with Krause and I’m in a Broadway play at the moment, Mr. Meisner, where I have a nice scene and I’d love to give you tickets. I’ll put some tickets up for you. All I want, sir, is to start studying the scene work with you and not have to go all the way to the beginning of the process, where you spend a year doing sense memory exercises and all kinds of things that are part of the early process of learning,” which I felt I had already done and could prove that by my audition performance. I said, “I'll come in and do a scene for you, if I may. If I do that and if you still think I should start at the beginning of your classes, I will.”

Now that seems reasonable. I’m coming to take classes and I want to show you that I'm not someone who walked in off the street; I know a little bit about what I'm doing. I've been in acting classes since I was 11 years old at the YMHA, so why should I be treated like some Joe who just got off the train from Indiana?

George DiCenzo

I was appointed to the faculty of University of the Arts in Philadelphia. They wanted me to teach acting to the third-year students. I said, “I've turned down teaching in academia for many reasons, prime of which is I don't like to go by the book. I don't like to go by the rules.” And I don't like the bureaucratic bullshit and all that. They said, “It doesn't matter. We want you.” So, I took the job and went there.

I meet these 15 kids. Therein I learned a big lesson: the difference between coaching and teaching. I’m a coach: really, a teacher for actors who are already touched by this wondrous thing called acting and have worked in the theater or film, but teaching by the book, per se, by quotes and by paragraphs, is not my cup of tea.

So, I went ahead and the first thing they told me, I had to prepare a syllabus. Oh. [laughs] So, I made up a syllabus. I literally made it up.

[Tony: You didn't have to spell it, did you, George?]

And the syllabus was part bullshit and part...I put down the five pages of this stuff and presented it to them.

And I did my first class and then came these 15 people, young people. And I had them each do a monologue, a one- to three-minute monologue. They were pretty good, surprisingly pretty good.

So, I was going by my gut instinct and by the way I had been taught in my acting classes. I said, “Next time we meet, we’ll have an evaluation of each very quickly, but I want each to know my feelings
And he said: “Well, I’m sorry, you can’t walk before you can crawl. There’s no way that you can possibly study with me unless you start from the beginning.” I said, “Do you mean that no one can be a good actor unless they start with your process?” He said, “Well, maybe one in a thousand” and I said, “Well, I think I’m the one.” I got up and I left.

He later said to someone—which got back to me five years later at a party—that he thought that Tony Roberts was the most arrogant young man he had ever met. He had the reputation of being the most arrogant man that ever lived. So, we talk about Gestalt was going on. We Gestalt with each other. There you go.

[laughter]

about it when we have the next class.” And I did. I said: “Martin, I think you’re the leading man, blah, blah, blah, so forth. You exude a certain warmth, charisma and so forth and so on. Why didn’t you get angry in this monologue which calls for anger?” And Mark...I would go through each one. Well, that was fine, the class was over.

Next class came, second week, one of the professors came up to me and said, "George, I would like to talk to you after class."

So, he said. "We've had a complaint from one of your students." I said, "Already? What is it about?"

He said, "Well, she said that you're not really following..." Who's the famous asshole teacher that everybody studied with?

[Tony: Meisner?]

Yes. For one, I hadn't followed Sandy Meisner, the way he teaches. I said, "Well, I'm not Sandy Meisner. If you want the Sandy Meisner approach, hire someone who has worked with Sandy Meisner and bring him in here." And he said, "Well, that's really not the point. The point is we've got to force them to go along the Sandy Meisner route." And then I said, "Well, I wasn't told that when I was asked to be a teacher here. I was told to teach any way I wanted." He kind of hemmed and hawed, and basically was saying: "You've got to change your ways if you want to stay here." I said, "Well, I'll try to respect what you're saying and maybe do something different."

So that the next class I tried to get some kind of historical information into the class about each of the characters they were doing, where they were, the location, the feeling, the intimacy, all of that stuff. Well, the same young student complained again. So, I was called in to talk to this guy again. He said, "I don't think it's going to work." I said, "What?" He said, "We'll honor your contract. And you'll be paid for the ten weeks. But, it is not working because you are, in my estimation, more of a coach than a teacher."

Oh, it really hit me right between the eyes. I said,
"What's the difference?" He said, "Well, coaching, you work with people to delve into who they are and what part of them is in the character and how you could let them see that and strengthen it. And do it more proficiently, with more impact" and so forth and so on. "Teaching is using principles that have been tested over years and years and years. And have been written about in many, many books and have proven to be the Bible by which all schools are run."

End of my teaching job. After four weeks.

I can see Fritz Perls now, saying [Viennese accent]: "Vhat did you think?" Well, I thought this guy was an asshole, but I didn't say it. And I thought I should have listened to my soul and not gone there because this could make me feel "less than."
In our business, you don't want to ever feel less than. You don't want to feel that you need a whole orchestra. You want to be able to go and do a solo.

So, one is more of a traditional, based upon literature, based upon the rules and regulations, based upon descriptive ways in which human beings react. "Fear, what is fear? Fear is exhibited and shown and performed by the following: one grabs one's throat," and all this kind of shit.

The teachers in these stories dismissed the person’s knowledge and discounted the value of experience. Meisner seemed certain that Tony was at the crawling stage, not yet ready to walk, without the benefit of data; he even refused to see the demonstration. George’s boss was unwilling to let the students learn by experiencing fear, for example, but insisted on the teacher telling them how they should respond to fear and the universal ways to communicate fear. Yet, both Tony and George ultimately trusted their experience and walked away from situations that would impose theory, models, and curriculum and disregard personal experience. Tony was written off as an arrogant young man and George did not measure up, because he was not Meisner. Both herd that they were “less than”; they were not good enough. As we wrote this, we still heard George’s voice: “I should have listened to my soul.”

**EXPERIENCES OF COACHING**

Jim’s first experience of coaching involved observing Nathaniel coaching other individuals in a group setting at a dating workshop. This led him to work with Nathaniel as his coach. Nathaniel talked about an experience he had while Mark coached him during a class at Lehigh University. This experience led him to study Gestalt coaching.
Jim

It was the validating and emphasizing and actually creating as wide open a space as possible for the person to fully express and experience themselves. Not just the environment around them, but even their own inner environment that could block someone considering certain things, going down a certain path, or allowing oneself to really think more expansively about themselves and their experience.

It was a very deep empathetic mirroring, which resonated with me. I could see what it was doing with other people and it was resonating with them as well, which then kept the experience expanding so that we all felt heard. They could hear themselves and see what's there... There was no judgment or slant or prescriptions. It was just, hey, kind of, what's there.

To affirm... He was very interested, genuinely, in what that person's experience was. He wanted to help them, to suffer with them, what, whatever they were dealing. He had a very sincere interest in that person experiencing, just for himself, whatever he was with.

Nathaniel

The lecture [by Mark] was just very, very brief, the didactic part of it—general overview of the contact cycle, I think. That was kind of intellectually stimulating, but the thing that was salient to me was some work we did together. I was at a place where I was trying to make some academic decisions about taking some time off for self-exploration but I didn't feel as though that was being validated by other people.

And a 15 minute, maybe 30-minute, very brief piece of work that Mark and I did as a demonstration for the class...we addressed that together and we did so in an incredibly fast, very to-the-point way that was supportive, challenging, and just uber-direct. I was just impressed at the ability to be able to get to the emotional core of the issue: To be able to get to the intellectual core of the issue, that I felt like that was something I wanted to be able to give my clients.

I became really interested in Gestalt therapy. I'd always had kind of a passive interest in coaching. The opportunity over at the Gestalt Therapy Institute [of Philadelphia] to do the program and Gestalt coaching opened up an opportunity for me to further explore my Gestalt interest and explore the coaching aspect. I got into that program. I just became immersed in the body of coaching literature and I kind of nurtured the Gestalt perspective that I had in the context of the coaching work.

Both coaches worked with a client in a group setting. Each client had a burning concern. This demonstration method, according to Jim, expanded the experience and allowed all in the group to learn. In Jim’s case, having the opportunity to watch others work with Nathaniel offered a preview of what he might experience by working with someone who had a sincere interest in him and would encourage him to embrace his own experience. This was more than an interesting possibility; he had something important he wanted to work on. Nathaniel had been quick to volunteer to do a demonstration piece with Mark, as he had been wrestling with the notion of taking a leave of absence from his doctoral program. The curriculum was not giving him what he felt he needed. Working as client with Mark as coach, Nathaniel lived what is possible with “show, not tell.” This demonstration revealed for Nathaniel the power of starting with the client’s concern and jumping into the pool, rather than teaching the clients what they must first learn and talking about that before taking any action. Nathaniel felt supported and challenged; he was amazed at what they could accomplish in 15 minutes—without a lot of
“getting ready to get ready.” It was synchronistic for Nathaniel that the process Mark was using was actually the content he was seeking, an answer to his question of how to work with clients more holistically.

Redia and Mary Anne

Redia described what it was like to work with Mary Anne. Mary Anne described how she coached and how she coached prior to any formal training. We heard about the experience of coaching from both chairs.

Redia

It was important for me to have the trust, empathy, the credibility the person came with, the personal connection that I felt I could have with her. It was important for me to see her as a human being who herself had some experiences. You know, it doesn't come out in: “Oh yeah, I've been there, let me tell you how it happened.” It's just in her listening and her questioning. Occasionally, she would say, “Not to focus on me; however, let's go down the path of what happened with me...” She would pull from insights of her own personal knowledge, which could be triggers for me to ask questions or help me think about something different later, or bring something to light that I might not have.

So the connection is a very important thing. There are some people that you can talk to you, you feel connected with, but you may not want them to coach you. The thing about Mary Anne for me was, as a human, was, I felt her to be warm. I felt her to be very open. I felt her to be very curious about how she could help. I felt her to be very giving about insights and perspectives that she had, where it made sense for her to open up and share a little bit.

She was an incredible listener.

Mary Anne

[Talking about her experience coaching as a manager prior to training]

I never realized what I did. I was not as self-aware until I went through the Gestalt program. I just did what came natural to me. I listened. OK? I tried to focus on me; however, let's go down the path of what happened with me..." I tried to help people become more aware. I tried to motivate them to do what they really wanted to do themselves. They just didn't know they wanted to do it.

I wasn't trying to force them; I was trying to support them into action. So, until I actually went to the Gestalt program, I didn't have a handle on what I was doing. So, Gestalt... I found a way to define what I was doing. And it helped me in practice. I'm not saying that I was so great. I'm just saying it helped me practice. And it helped me become more self-aware. And when you become more self-aware, then you can coach better. I really do believe the difference in a coach and an excellent coach is intuition. And they really helped me understand myself better, and you can coach better if you know where you are sitting.

I just think paying attention to signals that people give you, and not pre-judging. It's about staying objective, staying open, listening, and giving. It's not about you feeling good about the coaching session, although you want to feel good about it. What you really want to do is provoke the client into thinking about something differently. All right? And so, intuition...you listen, you do use judgment, because that intuition allows you to use judgment—when to interrupt, when to challenge, when to just let silence do the heavy lifting. So,
intuition plays a very heavy role in good executive coaching.

Redia felt a sense of connection. She experienced Mary Anne as warm, open, curious, giving, and wanting to be of help. She appreciated the coach’s willingness to share her own experiences; she felt heard. Mary Anne was conscious about the dangers of making judgments: wanted to motivate people and help them become aware, to support them to get clear about and take action on what they wanted for themselves. She watched for the signals people gave her, discovered her own lack of awareness in some areas, and came to conclude that self-awareness and intuition were key coaching competencies.

Rebecca and Susan

Rebecca recounted the typical experience of a voice lesson below. Susan shared ways in which she invited clients to try some different things. These experiments led to improved performance and new awareness.

Rebecca

It was a pretty standard voice lesson. We would have to do a bit of a vocal warm-up. Sometimes, she would step out of the warm-up to give me a mini-lecture on something about how the vocal apparatus works, the musculature of your abdominal wall or something. And then we would choose music and just sing.

Susan creates this amazing space to work in, you know, so that when you walk in her studio, it's not only a safe place, but it's a place where you just feel like nothing else in the rest of your life applies.

I mean, some of it is her presence, but a lot of it is just the word choices. It's a very different vocabulary than what you tend to hear out in the world. It's very different. It's kind of saying, “OK, let's just explore this;” “let's just look and see what's there.” Not like, “Oh, let's dig up some stuff and judge if it's good or bad or helpful or not. Let's just look and see.”

The other thing she does is she'll echo back to me words that I say to her. You know, it's sort of like, “Oh, you said this and it's not actually the thing you think you said.” You know? And, again, it's not a judgment like, "Oh, this is a bad thing you said."

First, let me say this. Singing lessons are divided into two halves, more or less, exercises and songs. Again, so this depends on the person, but my easiest route would be to develop skills first in exercises, but not everybody likes to do that.

So I might say, okay, so I might say, “How would you feel standing all the way across the room to sing? Go over there, see how you feel, and tell me how you feel.” “Great, you'd be willing to do one exercise in that position? Great. Can you still hear me? Great, okay here's what we are going to sing.” And I would propose something that is well within the range of the person and I'll say, “Send it across.” Now to just be...having to cover more space with the sound. “I can't hear you any different, okay? Okay, make fists. All right, let's do this while you are singing the exercise.” That's often very effective, okay? I could talk about why, but I don't think that's what you're asking me right now.

Or I will do something else to engage their whole body. “Okay, so as you are doing it, let's lift and then lower, okay, and so now as you go on to the next piece of the exercise, lift and lower.” One, I'm
It's more like, "Oh, did you realize that you just used this word? What does that word actually mean to you?" And, it gives you a chance to hear something that you're saying, that you say so much you don't even hear it anymore.

And then, someone gives you the opportunity to hear it without attaching a good, bad, or ugly to it. And then, again, you know, you're in that place where you can go, "Oh, I didn't realize I was using that word. That's actually not what I mean, like, it's not what I want to mean, you know, I want to be going in a different direction." And using these particular words is giving me hell–it's a particular mindset that's keeping me stuck in this place I'm trying to move out of.

I may have a student who is already standing at a distance from me so I'll have them look out the window or at one of the paintings in my room, which happen to have a lot of depth. And, okay, I'll say, “See that painting? Pick something in the painting and sing to it.” And that activates whatever it takes for a body to produce sound.

Rebecca described a space that felt safe and free of judgment; it helped her be fully present and set aside things beyond this place and time. She noticed that the coach was intentional, even in the use of language. The coach did not filter, did not prescribe; her voice was an echo and then simply raised questions. Rebecca became aware of how her own words created hell; their use revealed the presence of the mindset that kept her stuck. Susan asked, slowly, in a step-by-step manner, if the client would be willing to change space, sing from another location, and perform a piece she knew to be comfortably within the client’s range. The client agreed to try engaging the body, felt tension in muscles of the hands and forearms, or directed and fixed her eyes on some object of her choosing. She sang. The coach asked, “What did you experience?” The coach did not lecture on retroflection, ribcages, or breathing. Just sing. The lecture might come later, or not at all, but only after the client produced the sound and answered, “What did you notice?

**Tony and George**

Both Tony and George told stories about how acting coaches disturbed unawareness and created awareness of what was happening in the moment.

**Tony**

What is your role in helping to make that clear to the audience? What do you bring towards that theme? Are you the villain, are you the protagonist? What is at stake for this character? What do they stand to lose? All of these things are what I would call canon. They were taught to me by my acting teacher—the finest acting teacher, I think, next to Strasburg and anybody else that ever lived. Her name was Alvina Krause.

And the list of people who've studied with her is trying to undo retroflection. Two, I'm just trying to get their breath going more. You know this will get the rib cage moving, and without them having to think about it, “Oh rib cage.”

**George**

I try to use an aspect of the person. Let's take The Visit. Do you know the play? He [Tony] gave a pretty good synopsis of it. The town does kill this guy. I try and take an aspect of the person that's on stage, the actor. And find something that he or she is either invested in wearing, or the way in which they move, or the general tenor of their emotionality: Are they excitable, are they slow-witted, are they quick, are they acerbic in life? And try to somehow move that part of them into the character at a particular time. So, let's say they
longer than any of the lists of successful people in show business in the last hundred years.

She taught a little bit of the canon, of how you analyze a piece of the script. What you, as an actor, are supposed to do. And that was not something that you had to take a test on, but it was something that was drilled into you as process. At the same time, she had to find a way to make each of us find that moment of truth inside. That registers as aesthetic truth in a theater or in front of the camera. And to do that you have to be coach, analyst, supporter, and encourager. You have to reinforce someone's belief in their own feelings. And that if they'll allow their own feelings to come forth, they'll be valid or they'll be invalid.

George: And that's where the coach is very helpful. That's the way she helped in getting those feelings out.

Tony: Well she did it by any means she could imagine. And I'll just tell you one or two of the devices that she used. She would actually, in the middle of a scene of a play: let's take *The Visit* for example. I don't know if you are familiar with that play? But, it's a play about a town that decides to accept a huge financial bailout in exchange for murdering one of its citizens.

A man was accused of having raped a wealthy woman when she was a young girl and then denied it. And she was shunned from the town and went off to become the richest lady in the world. And she comes back one day in a train; this is a Friedrich Durrenmatt play, which the Lunts did on Broadway, and it's magnificent. She makes this proposal to the mayor of the town. But, of course, they are all horrified and they say, “Absolutely not. We would never do such a thing.” She'd say, “In your own words, what the hell are you talking about in this play? What are you doing here? Why are you here?” And you'd have to suddenly start really thinking about it; I was really sitting around, it was a good role. “Well, I'm Henry Higgins and I teach this and I... “Why is it important that you do that?” “Well, it's important...” Well, before you know it, you're in it, you're emotional, you're defending something.

And then she would say to somebody else, “Riley, get up. You're Eliza Doolittle. Why are you in this house? How did you get here?” “Well, I was in the street and this guy came and picked up... well, no, he doesn't have the right. No, he can't talk to me like that because I'm this...” and she said, “Start
mean, all the lights out in the theater, on the stage, in the whole thing. And somehow, she says, in the dark... as she makes her way up onto the stage... "What are you thinking now? What are you really thinking? How about that house you'd like to have? Didn't you want to buy your neighbor’s business? What are you thinking now?" And she'd walk around in the dark and she'd whisper in people’s ears. And she'd give them a subtext. She’d actually tell them what the character would probably be thinking about.

Well, in the dark, where you were relieved from having to show anything. You know what I mean? You don't have to perform because you're in the dark, so nobody can see it. You will discover a truth to a thought that registers in your own mechanism. And you know that that's happening.

And at that point, maybe two minutes later, she'd flip the lights on. And she would say, "Now look at your neighbor. Did they know what you were thinking?" And everybody adjusts. And everybody puts their clothes back on, to look like they need to look to the person who is sitting next to them in church or town hall or whatever. And she would say, "Now remember that, because that's what's going on in this room when the lights are on."

So, now you do the scene with the lights on, and by God, it has a reality that it didn't have before. That was one of her ways.

In the safety of the dark, Tony and the other students no longer needed to worry about appearances. The coach questioned to raise awareness about what was happening and how they were responding. The coach had to “find a way to make each of us find moment of truth inside” and support the students to risk bringing forth their own feelings. George started with the student’s experience, and by using spicy language, primed them to express feelings without reserve. The performance was transformed.
CORE ASPECTS: THE EXPERIENCE OF COACHING

The experience of coaching involves (1) a person, or a group, (2) with a goal, (3) creating a relationship with a coach, (4) experiencing/experimenting, (5) becoming aware, and (6) realizing results.
PERSON [OR GROUP] WITH A GOAL

Coaching starts with a person in a situation who wants to achieve something.

In the beginning, there is a particular human being, a person, surrounded by other persons, living in an environment: a particular place and time marked by specific conditions and qualities.

That man, woman, or child has uniquely personal concerns. Each feels a pull to live fully. Each alternately feels supported and constrained by the ever-changing situation and the people around them. Each person daily faces alternatives, chooses, decides, and commits (Wild, 1963).

The person senses a need, desire, problem, or opportunity; identifies a desire for assistance; and explores potential sources. In the case of executive coaching, the boss likely initiates the work by proposing coaching either as a development opportunity or to turn around unsatisfactory performance. A coach gets a call. Client and coach meet, develop an agreement, a charter for the work together, and the work begins.

CREATING A RELATIONSHIP WITH A COACH

Creating a relationship with a coach includes (a) creating a space for challenge and for support, acceptance, and lack of judgment; (b) being present; and (c) relating to a particular person. The words of those in the interviews illustrate the concepts.

The relationship between client and coach is a “working alliance,” “built on goals and tasks.” The import of the relationship is made explicit” the client sees the “connection as very important.” It is a “collaborative,” “democratic relationship,” and “not like those with boss or parent.” It is “like and not like those with therapist, teacher, analyst,” and not at all like the “drill sergeant kind of coach.” The relationship is “built over time” based on “the experience of working together.” It is an “emotional bond” characterized by “deep respect,” “trust,” “easy repartee,” “candidness,” “nurturing,” and “giving.” The” level of comfort is very high,” the client experiences the coach as “coming from great love and compassion.”

Creating a Space

A number of clients employed the metaphor of “creating space.” Clients described the coach creating space by “providing challenge and support,” “acceptance,” and “lack of judgment.”

Challenge and Support. The coach provided “great support,” “like an extension of your best self,” and yet he or she was able to challenge the client. Support and challenge were expressed with equal ease.

Clients experienced support in many ways; the coach "helps you, suffers with you," and "understands your needs." The relationship was an "emotional and motivational scaffolding" that "supports self-examination," "getting feelings out," and "being most vulnerable." The coach was "credible," "empathic," and "trustworthy." The purpose of the work was to serve the client. It was "not
about the coach feeling good about the session." Concerning the client reaching the established goals, the coach must remember, "Only they can do it."

Clients experienced challenge when the coach "questions," "provokes the client," or "brings up very hard things to fix;" the coach "jars people out of their normalcy." The coach was "direct and honest," "tell the truth," and, in a gentle way, "encourages discipline that leads to creation." The coach would "push just enough."

**Acceptance and Lack of Judgment.** Clients described the experience of acceptance in many ways, among them: "full unconditional acceptance," "accepting the client without trying to change them," and "understanding you and your needs." Individual clients were "each completely different," "all have a different purpose for being," "different learning style," and the "coaching work must be customized for the individual." All of this emerged from accepting the persons for who they are.

There was "respect for the person's experience;" it was "never discounted." As one said, "All of my experience was accepted." The client felt the coach "reinforces a person's belief in their own feelings and experiences." The coach was interested in the client’s experience, "not putting his or her own spin on it."

The coach had “respect for what people know" and “respect for what they want to learn." By way of contrast with the expert teacher, the coach did not “treat me like someone who just got off the train from Indiana.” The coach did not impose a methodology, did not insist on the client "learning a canon," and "has no curriculum" that must be followed. So, coaching was not about "jamming facts down someone's throat."

Choice is important. The coach would "ask permission," "give choices," "make suggestions," and "not force" or even pressure a client to try something, but would "leave open the space...to say yes or no." The purpose of coaching was "not about what the coach wants for the client" but rather in helping the clients get clear about what they wanted for themselves.

Clients "do not feel judged." Feedback was "offered in a way that the client can hear it without feeling judged or shamed." They experienced the environment in coaching sessions as "very open," they felt encouraged to "cultivate a spirit of inquiry" and to "just see what is without judging." While the coach certainly made judgments; for example, in how to work together, the coach was "non-judgmental," "you don't experience them as judging you or chastising you."

Jim: Even some really tough uncomfortable thing things were tolerable within the context of coaching. Now, I don't know whether it is the concept of the coaching approach or whether that is unique to Nathaniel's person... It has been a huge telling thing for me that I am still interested and can stay in touch, even though there is something that historically can be reactionary for me.

This enabled the client "to become aware of own judgments about self" and the experience of not being judged might have the person say: "Let me be like this person who is not judging." He or she is then better able to "look inside without judgment" and come to experience that "dropping my own
judgments myself feels good." In their relationship with others, clients could experiment with "not judging others," especially "not pre-judging others’ reactions to them" or to initiatives they might take.

**Being Present**

Whether in person or on the telephone, the client is aware of the "presence" of the coach. The coach is "committed to being with you," "really being present," and "attending to where the client is." The client experiences the coach as "genuinely interested," "listening," and continually "noticing" what is happening in the moment. The coach "knows when to interrupt, when to challenge, and when to support." The coach employs "use of self," he or she will "tap into constructive aspects of self," and use his or her own experience with the client; for example, "feeling drained," as potentially useful data that needs to be checked out with the client for resonance. The contact with the client is "very intentional." The coach pays attention to being in the experience, with awareness of what is happening. The client cannot help but notice "being present in the interpersonal relationship" is important to the coach and he or she leaves each session with a feeling of "being heard."

**Relating to the Particular Person of the Coach**

From the initial meeting, the vital question concerns fit. The person is not looking for a method or a school of coaching. The client seeks someone based on “background and experience,” “being in similar shoes,” and who he or she is “as a human being.”

Rebecca: I am curious about how much of this is Gestalt training and how much is who Susan is as a human being;

Jim: I don’t know, is it the approach or is it Nathaniel?

The experience of the meeting provides the foundation of the decision that the client chooses to work with the coach or not. Method does not get in the way.

Redia: So the connection is a very important thing. There are some people that you can talk to, feel connected with, but you may not want them to coach you. The thing about Mary Anne for me was, as a human being...I felt her to be warm; I felt her to be very open. I felt her to be very curious about how she could help. I felt her to be very giving.

**The Outcomes**

The outcomes from this coaching relationship included the abilities to have a better relationship with self and better relationships with others.

Concerning the relationship with self, participants spoke of the increased willingness to risk being authentic: “connected to deeper self;” “allow yourself to be seen and heard by yourself;” “coming from integrity and confidence;” “scary;” “cannot shy away;” “lose inhibition;” “be balls out;" “face fear;” “being vulnerable;” “might appear stupid or foolish;” “beyond fear and insecurity.” Based on their experience of a particular kind of relationship with the coach in which they “would drop every self-doubt
and every fear,” and based on their experience of the coach “being authentic,” they were willing to live more authentically.

Concerning the relationship with others, they spoke of being more aware of the import of relationships with others: “awareness of relationship with others,” “attention to the other,” and “awareness of audience reaction.” They saw value in being better connected: “be enriched by others, not threatened;” “value the input from others;” “others responded to me based on her relationship with them;” “helping me to connect to others (network).” At the same time, they expressed awareness of the need to manage “being other-directed,” “taking on the other person's stuff,” “thwarted by reactions from others,” and “setting boundaries with others”. Based on their experience of how the coach interacted with them, they saw the “impact of the integrity” and developed a “willingness to be transparent.” No longer would people “need a [expletive deleted] megaphone to hear them.”

**EXPERIENCING AND EXPERIMENTING**

In this atmosphere of a particular kind of relationship, client and coach go to work. The material for the work is experience. Client and coach take up an attitude and way of working that foster (a) experiencing first, (b) noticing what is happening in the experience to raise awareness, and (c) experiencing self-examination in an environment of unconditional acceptance. Their outlook is experimental: a willingness to try things and see what happens.

Susan: The sense of making an experiment, in singing lessons or performance of any kind, means knowing that you can keep it or throw it away. You know? We are not deciding in advance.

**Experiencing First**

Coaching starts with "addressing a person’s experience," based on a desire to understand that experience without filtering it through some theory, model, or orthodoxy for what “should be.” Issues and experiences from daily living are the material they work with in coaching conversations, not a curriculum or pre-set agenda or path.

Rebecca: I think when people hear the word "coaching," they think about the rah-rah cheerleader. Almost like your high school phys. ed. coach or like the soccer coach who would be running along beside you when you are totally exhausted. Like, “Come on, you can do a quarter mile more!” They’re like screaming at you, trying to get you to pull one last bit out of yourself. Which is really judgmental, and it’s pushing or someone putting something on you.

I think successful coaching, like what I get with Susan, is someone using the tools and the place to let you figure out what you want. Maybe you don’t want to run the last quarter mile. Maybe you want to say, “I’m done. I'm going to go drink some water.” It's helping you form for yourself what you want to create for yourself.

There is “not a set of things to be accomplished;” it is simply a matter of attending to experience,” “holistic experience,” “not to feel bad about it,” “not a bunch of excuses or defenses or
confrontation:” the goal is “just to see it for what is.” Coach and client occupy themselves with things that matter deeply to the client. The coach is "very interested in the person's experience" and helps the client to "uncover experience" by "giving you an opportunity to hear it without attaching a good, bad, or ugly to it." It is through "deep empathic mirroring" that the client arrives at “empirical truth.”

Tony: You have to reinforce someone's belief in their own feelings. And that if they'll allow their own feelings to come forth, they'll be valid or they'll be invalid.

George: And that's where coach is very helpful.

Previous experience is honored; however, the coach "only needs to know enough about the past to understand how that is directing or influencing your behavior in the present.” “Understanding where they are” is more important than history.

Over time, coach and client build a shared base of experience, a history together. The coach will “teach based on how long we have been working together and what I have found out about their learning style” and "draw upon what we have developed." The coach taps into personal history and experience when appropriate: “I have some experience, I have some tools, and I have some ideas, and I am going to bring those to the table.”

Clients value demonstrations as experiential ways to learn. As a client observes the coach working with one member of a group, he or she can “witness the coach validating and helping another uncover their experience.” One client said, “I could see what it was doing with other people. It was resonating with me. The experience was expanding” to everyone in the room. Rather than talking about coaching to a prospective client, a coach gets “quickly to the point” and starts coaching: “This is what I do; now you see what I do.” Knowledge is tested via performance.

Experimentation, creating learning experiences, is the primary teaching mode. The coach might say: “Get up on your feet,” “Let's just explore this,” “Let's just see what's there,” “Let's play with this,” “What if we were to go this way and see what happens, or what if we were to go that way?” Coaches always make choice explicit, even in cases where the risk might be minimal: “Would you be willing to try a little experiment?” or “Would you be open to trying to do this?” Safety is important: “If that doesn't feel right for you or if it doesn't feel safe, don't do it.” The coach might say, “Maybe we can find a way to make it feel safer or explore why it doesn't feel safe in the first place.” One client said, “I've been willing to go somewhere instead of saying I can't”. Another said, “I could actually explore it and so understand it and change it.” Another said, “I always felt, at any point in time, I could just say, 'I don't want to do this, let's do something different.'”

Tony: But she had devices like that. She'd give us a tennis ball and she would say, "You stand over there on that side of the stage and you stand on that side of the stage and you're doing a scene from George Bernard Shaw." George Bernard Shaw is a play about ideas. It's about the exchange of ideas. It's a witty argument about something. Always. Always. That's what's underneath it. It's intellectual, it's like French drama. The same thing, it's very up here.
She said, “I want you to throw the tennis ball to the other actor when you make your point.” Because, you’re having a catch. Well, you’d be amazed: you think, you throw it faster, you loop it. You are sending something to each other in a way and communicating, through this ball. Now you take the ball away and you do the scene. My God, the scene is different! Jesus, there’s an engagement of minds; there’s a sense of game. And there’s a reason why an audience wants to see it. They are now interested. They don’t even know, they didn’t know that you rehearsed with a ball.

Some experiments happen in the meeting with the coach; others happen afterwards and results are brought back to the next session. The client might practice some new way of acting or coming into contact with another person and get immediate feedback from the coach on how the coach experienced that.

The coach cultivates an experimental attitude: “Just try things out,” “This is one way of working; there are a wide variety of ways of working,” “We can proceed at a variety of paces,” “Look at this as if you’ve never seen it before,” “Just sing.” The client is encouraged to go out and test different ways of behaving; the coaching opens up the freedom to explore.

Attention is directed to what is actually happening right here, right now, rather than talking about something that happened in the past or might happen in the future. Even in recounting what happened since the last coaching session, the coach always brings it right into the present: “What are you experiencing right now as you tell me this?” He or she might ask, “Would you like to know what is going on in me as I hear this, right now?”

George: So whatever I learned, you got to be able to be balls out, you cannot shy away. You have to be direct with people and truthful with people. And my students, I think, will tell you. I tell them the truth. I don’t insult them, but I tell them the truth. And I’ll find a way of finding that truth for them, not necessarily for me, but for them.

And I learned that from Fritz. The reality, the honesty with a touch of something that jars people out of their normalcy and can make them [check] the way in which they have been doing things.

As Tony says, you got to hear it in the back of the fuckin’ room, some of these people. They do the greatest acting in the world, but you need a fuckin’ megaphone to hear them because they are afraid to expose that private part of themselves out loud.

**Noticing What is Happening in the Experience to Raise Awareness**

After the experiment, there is immediate reflection on that experience. “What are you experiencing?” “What was that like for you?” “What was interesting?” “What was daunting?” “What are you thinking right now?” “What does that word actually mean to you?” “Did you notice that?” One coach said, “I am constantly asking them: What are you experiencing?” Noticing what just happened in the experience is the tool for raising awareness.

Tony: Krause would say, if you walked into a scene, she would stop you before you took two steps into a room or even utter a word. She would say, "Wait a minute, hey, where are you coming from?" But, the actor would have never thought about where he was coming from. He
was coming from back stage. "No, but what if I am coming from outdoors where it is snowing? And I am so glad to get here, because I had to go through the woods to get here. So, what is that first moment like, when the person opens the door now?" So, it doesn't mean that you have to create a blizzard, but you've got to create "Where did you just come from?" You didn't just walk in from the wings from your dressing room. That's the first thing, before you even come out. "Where have I been?" It's like creating a reality and a truth.

Brando, who we both love, would find ways to make a moment true that had to do with sensory work that he would do. If he felt himself false and phony in a moment, he would throw his entire focus into the way his fingers felt rubbing together. Suddenly it put him into a place of behavioral truth that was undeniably fascinating, in the middle of something, and he's always doing that.

The clients pay attention to thoughts, feelings, sensations, behaviors, responses from others, and what is going on in the environment.

As the client continues to work toward achieving the goals, the coach will “keep bringing up reality and vision, honoring progress on actions that have been made, and seeing what is left to address” without any blaming or shaming.

**Experiencing Self-Examination in an Environment of Unconditional Acceptance**

The relationship with the coach makes it safe to experience and experiment. The coach is “not like a supervisor or parent or personal relationship,” wherein the other has an agenda tied up with yours. “This is like an extension of your best self.” The coach has a “sincere interest in the person for their own sake, will help them, suffer with them” and provide a “larger window, a larger space to really feel what they are experiencing.” Initially, “You take it on faith,” but they “create this amazing space to work in,” knowing that “coaching is a very individualized process.” One said, “My biggest fear is that I will not live up to what he thinks I am.”

Rebecca: What I would be curious to know at this point about Susan is how much of her work is just from who she is as a human being. How much is based on her Gestalt training. I suppose people get attracted to certain training based on who they are as a person. There must be something in Gestalt training that's about nurturing from a safe place.

**The Outcomes**

“I got past all of my own judgments” about what I was capable of doing, “I forgot all of my fucking problems.” In those sessions with the coach, “It was like nothing from the rest of my life mattered.”

These exercises “caused you to lose inhibitions about acting foolish or appearing stupid.” The experiences had me “start listening,” “let me drop my own judgment about myself and others to see how that would feel.” They “helped me become more self-aware.”
BECOMING AWARE

And so, within this person-centered space of client and advocate, working with experience and experimenting with different ways of doing things, they probe the experiences and that leads to—becoming aware. The theme “becoming aware” involves (a) questioning and experimenting to raise awareness; (b) two kinds of awareness, self-awareness and awareness of self-in-relation to environment and other persons; and, finally,(c) making explicit how the relationship between coach and client facilitates becoming aware.

Questioning to Raise Awareness

The coach’s major intervention is asking questions, especially questions about what is going on in the moment. This ever-present questioning feels strange in a world where people expect authorities to provide answers. Over time, the client develops sensitivity to what is going on in the moment and might adopt practices to make a habit of attending to events as they unfold in the present.

It is in the acting context that the power of questioning to raise awareness is most vivid, and here, the student or client discovers how lack of awareness damages performance. Of course, this applies to performance of any kind relevant to the person’s practice or work: here the practice is acting. An actor walks onstage, the coach asks, “Where did you just come from?” He replies, “From backstage.” Maybe he had stood in the wings, engrossed in how he would respond to the feedback he heard from the voice in his head. Maybe irritated by the fight he had with his girlfriend, a fellow student he saw perched on the back of a seat in the front row, or savoring the prospect of the Chinese take-out they would pick up after class and the make-up sex. The coach draws from his horde of questions. “What is this play about?” “In your own words, what the hell are you talking about? What are you doing? Why are you here? Why is that important to you?” “Why are you in this house? How did you get here?” “What do you bring towards that theme? Are you the villain? Protagonist? What is at stake for the character? What do they stand to lose?” “What was this person’s life like? Where did they grow up? Who did they know? How did they get to this moment now?” The questioning disturbs the drift toward unawareness.

The coach in other settings might ask different questions. He or she might ask if the woman would be willing to try out delivering a message she wants to deliver back at work. If the client is willing, she stands up and delivers her message. The coach asks permission to pose some questions. Once granted, the questions come. "What was that like?" "How does that feel?" "What are you noticing?" "What was that experience like?" "What’s going on right now?" "Did you realize that you just used this word?" The coach might ask if the client is interested in how the coach experienced her delivering the message, and again, if requested, the coach reports his or her experience.

Knowing Self and “Self-in-Relation” to Environment and Other Persons

The clients bring to consciousness hidden things about themselves; maybe even things they don’t know they don’t know.
Redia: We went into this with the objective of increasing my self-awareness around myself as an individual. I wanted to take a number of assessment instruments to help me get a better handle on my strengths, as well as maybe what might be some blind spots. When you have been doing something for a long time, you kind of do it and you know it and you don’t wonder, “Did I miss this step or that or whatever?”

Areas of lack of self-awareness surface: “Oh, I didn’t realize I ...” or “I was just going on surface assumptions.”

Susan: Now, they don’t realize that they will have to encounter their own habits of learning, their habits of presenting themselves to others, and various other ways which they function that are successful or sometimes need to be amended.

Who am I? What is it that I want? Coaching leads to a “sense of yourself,” “finding yourself,” “being connected with our deeper selves.” It certainly entails “looking at all parts of your life,” results in a “better handle on strengths” and appreciation for “the vastness of what we are.” There is the recognition that “We are working on ourselves; we are the canvas.”

Mary Anne: Coaching is really intended to enhance effective accomplishments with the client, for the client. I would also describe it as a self-discovery process. Even though I am not a life coach, I am an executive coach and team coach. It’s almost imperative that you learn about yourself so that you can learn how you interact with others.

Jim: I don’t diminish the value of marketing reports and skyscrapers. They are all very important to the human condition. But, “Why the hell are we here anyway?” That seems to be a big question, a big one for me, anyhow.

The purpose of coaching is to support goal realization, yet achievement of those goals often requires the client to learn new skills, and in coaching, even in executive coaching, clients recognize you cannot separate person from competencies.

Susan: We are a whole person working on what seem to be specific skills…. What we think about ourselves as being competent or less competent will influence how that happens. So it’s not only whether we’ve learned the skills, but whether we feel we can risk using the skills in public, under pressure, or whether we feel—and these are all things that come up with my clients—like I’m bragging, like I’m showing off, like I’m trying too hard, like I’m taking up too much space, like I’m taking up too much air, like I am doing something that they don’t really want, like I am doing something that they don’t want, but I am not noticing that. So when people think they are studying only a craft, that’s maybe, that’s making them feel a little more relaxed, yet I am aware that they are having to grow their whole self to actually practice the craft and earn a living at it.

The coach actively works at being self-aware.

Redia: I was finding, whenever I got off the phone with him, that I was very, very drained. It appeared to me he was having trouble sequencing his thoughts, trouble with his focus. Lowest energy level I have encountered in a very, very long time, and yet he was in the process of starting up his business.
Susan: I am looking for how I am reacting to that person, what I am feeling in my body, what I am imagining, what ideas are coming up for me, in what ways I am connecting with that person and then I might offer something: “Gee, that reminded me of…. Or, I notice I keep wanting to say x…. Or, I am feeling something right in the pit of my stomach.” “I became curious about A. Would you want to tell me more about that?”

Becoming aware of self-in-environment, especially how the client interacts with other persons, is almost always a significant part of the work together.

Nathaniel: Clients have a very clear understanding of their goal…. I get them there through a process of helping them gain insight—and then in that way, it is similar to psychotherapy—into themselves and how they interact with their environment; how their environment experiences them.

The client gains “insight into themselves interacting with the environment” and “how their environment experiences them.” Maybe it is awareness of “tension in the muscles of my lips,” “movement of my jaw,” “stress in my body,” or an experiment that triggers awareness or maybe being struck by the absurdity of a thought.

Rebecca: Someone can say, "Oh well, that person is thinking this about me." And you know most of the time, they’re not. [Laughter]. It is us thinking that about us. By your complete lack of judgment that comes up in your face and says, "Oh that's the voice in my head that is judging." And then once you find that you can choose to either keep judging yourself or to say, “Well, let me be like this person sitting across from me [the coach], who is not judging.”

Jim: I could no longer hold on to the judgments that I made about other people or what I thought of my stepdad. It's like, “You know what, Jim; it's just your own fear and insecurity.”

Awareness can be a powerful Eureka moment—“come up in your face;” “it hit me right between the eyes”—or, more likely, a quiet recognition: “I never realized the difference.”

**Acknowledging the Importance of the Relationship between Client and Coach**

Hearing feedback, becoming conscious of things the coach notices about them, is facilitated by this unusual relationship of great respect.

Nathaniel: I did that [worked on client goals] while simultaneously giving them a whole lot of support: emotional support, motivational support, because that process of getting in touch with the environment, of experimenting in new ways of coming in contact with things, can frequently be very scary. It can be so challenging that many clients shut down.

The relationship is especially helpful when dealing with barriers to and facilitators for raising awareness. The coach “hears them,” “helps them open up some other possibilities,” encourages them to maintain a “belief in their own feelings” and keeps in mind that “It is possible to cause shame.” The goal is “not to avoid uncomfortableness” but to go into that territory with a strengthened sense of personal power, supported by a presence demonstrating “deep respect for me and where I am.”
Maybe there is a discrepancy, obvious to others, between “what you’re presenting versus what you’re looking to do.” The coach, given the strength of the relationship, can raise that question, not as a judgment, but as a confusing mismatch.

Nathaniel: And I think that’s an inclusiveness that is very, very unique to Gestalt therapy. A full humanistic acceptance of somebody—their mind and their body—and to have that both implicit and explicit in the session.

Alternately, a person might become aware of what might be a flaw or weakness and might express a desire to change. He might expect to be held to account at the next meeting with the coach. The coach simply asks, “How’s that going?” The client might respond defensively, but the coach quickly says, “I have no problem with that, one way or another.” The coach has no agenda and works at “preventing biases from entering into the work in a less than constructive way.” This “How’s it going” question is about “understanding you and your needs” and helping “you define for yourself” what you really want; the coach is willing “to guide you wherever you go.”

Outcomes

As a result of expanded self-awareness and awareness of self in relation, clients talk about “feeling empowered,” “thinking more expansively,” and “seeing myself in my fullness.” When coming into contact with others, outcomes might include “knowing what you want in your relationship” with others, “valuing input rather than being threatened by it,” and “being less defended.” The ways in which the client interacts with others are more “intentional.”

Rebecca: It has very much changed my voice when I teach. Instead of racing through, I find that slowing down and really being present with every word completely changes how the people in the audience hear what I say, and respond to what I say.”

GOALS: REALIZING RESULTS

The primary purpose of all the work in coaching is to help the client achieve the original stated goals. Of course, the client’s understanding of what he or she wants changes over time; revision is expected. Yet, the client’s goals are always the North Star. It is not about what the coach wants for the client. In addition to achieving some specific result, such as meeting a life partner or spouse, delivering a successful performance, completing a training program, starting a business, expanding professional competencies, or other, the client develops new skills, knowledge, and attitudes. Thus far, the results discussed involve what the client wanted from the contract.

Clients are often surprised at some of the results. They might be living lives characterized by greater awareness, being more true to self and authentic, while simultaneously experiencing better interpersonal relationships. In most cases, coaching leads to a more exciting and satisfying life for the client. Sometimes, the coaching is transformative. While these are surprises, they are happy ones, based on many choices made by the client along the way.
Coaches are also changed by this work.

Nathaniel: (Silence) I'm moved to say a small piece about my personal experience of the work that I do. I think that awareness of self within coaching, as within therapy, is absolutely key, not only in preventing your own biases from entering into the work in a less-than-constructive way, but also in preventing you from limiting the constructive aspects of yourself within the coaching relationship. And the work that I have done has been so incredibly inspirational to me that it has improved the quality of my life: in working with people, in working with the clients who are challenged in their dating relationships.

It's really allowed me to... it's really built me up. It really has, because I've seen just so much courage, so much hope, and so much progress by people who had, for very, very long, felt deep down, invalid and unaccepted by the entirety of society.

And to see these people, with just a little bit of water and a little bit of sunshine, grow so rapidly into flourishing, excited, vivacious people; it really has just inspired me to be able to be more fully myself in my relationships with them as a coach and in my own personal relationships. It's allowed me to more fully find myself and to fully accept myself.

**Core Aspects: The Experience of Coaching**

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<th>Person, or group, with a goal</th>
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<tr>
<td>– Particular person in a situation (experience)</td>
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<td>– Sensing a need, problem, or opportunity (awareness)</td>
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<td>– Identifying a desire for assistance and exploring potential sources (relationship)</td>
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<th>Creating a relationship with a coach</th>
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<td>– Noticing what happened in the experience to raise awareness (awareness)</td>
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<td>– Experiments, experimental approach to learning</td>
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<th>Realizing results</th>
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<td>– Contractual goals</td>
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<td>– New skills, knowledge, and attitudes</td>
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<tr>
<td>– Better contact with other persons</td>
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<td>– More exciting and satisfying life (sometimes transformation)</td>
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DISCUSSION

We would like to close by returning to the questions raised in the beginning. What is coaching? How is coaching different from psychotherapy? What is Gestalt coaching?

In the preceding section, we represented the experience of coaching based on a phenomenological (“the experience of”) approach, unmediated by the existing ways we think about or explain that experience. We collected descriptions of experiences. We reviewed the transcriptions for significant statements. We assigned meaning to those statements and looked for patterns and themes. The names for labels we used; namely, experience, relationship, awareness, and goals, were derived from the interviewees’ language. Therefore, we used these words in their ordinary dictionary sense. They were not technical terms and should not be taken as privileging one view of Gestalt over another.

Coaching and Psychotherapy

Due to what seemed to be a burning interest in distinguishing differences between coaching and psychotherapy, we asked the interviewees this very question. Their responses are below.

Psychotherapy

– More emotionally focused.
– Cry and do what you do.
– The boundary is a little soft.
– Therapy deals with the past.
– Therapists will tell you that they are helping you to clear up the past so that you can build a better future.
– If I continue to hear the words fear, mother or father, hate, or lots of trigger words, I’ll say to the individual, I can help you to move to the future with coaching, but I think you can benefit from working with a therapist. I won’t try fixing a relationship with a mother.
– An inside orientation process to help a person grow.
– More amorphous, moving toward self-actualization.

Coaching
Is very democratic.

Have tools, experience, ideas, and bring them to the table. You can choose what to do with them.

Coaching deals with building a future.

You only need to know enough about the past to help understand how that is directing and influencing your thoughts and actions at the moment, so you can change it.

Coaching is a process of supporting and challenging clients to achieve goals they set for themselves, and doing so in a more active manner than psychotherapy does.

I view coaching as specific, goal-oriented. There are specific benchmarks set for achieving—and the goal of coaching is to address whatever issues happen to get in the way of achieving that goal.

As coaches, we often find our engagements have therapeutic impact and value, such as life changes beyond stated goals. As psychotherapists, we often find ourselves providing coaching support or encouragement to try new things, experiment. Making distinctions between coaching and psychotherapy is an arduous task that, at best, produces arbitrary ways of describing each.

The occupation with making distinctions, including past versus present, pathology versus health, unconscious mind versus conscious mind, and others, can be a positive situation. Practitioners make a case for the integrity of coaching or therapy as discrete professions. What this might suggest is a value for grounding one’s professional activities in an important theoretical and philosophical discipline. However, the distinctions are simplistic ones that do not stand on solid ground; they fail the empirical test and do not hold up in real world practice.

In my (Mark) work, the lines between coaching and psychotherapy are blurry. Whichever clients call upon me to deliver is defined by the agreements made through the contracting process. I hold the initial contract lightly and respectfully; this discussion is part of the contracting process. Invariably, in my experience, contracted agreements change many times through the course of a working relationship, even within each individual engagement. As we engage with and attend to our clients, emerging data points or energetic figures require attention. We need to negotiate the focus of attention (contracting); all of this is part of the moment-to-moment experience in which we, as professionals and persons, are both participants and facilitators.

Since I (Martin) am not a therapist, even though I have a bit of training, I do not provide therapy; clearly, some coaching conversations have a therapeutic impact. People who are seeking therapy do not contract with me; I do not present myself as a therapist.

Perhaps it is when our clients present with patterns of experience that interrupt their path toward meeting expressed goals that psychotherapeutic interventions may be of benefit. Following amelioration of such patterns, the efficacy of coaching can improve.
Both coaching and psychotherapy provide opportunities for individuals, partners, colleagues, and groups to develop greater expertise at raising awareness, increasing choice-making capacity, and living and working more freely. This includes improved interpersonal relationships, especially inviting, living with, and learning from differences. Kurt Lewin, according to Segal (1997), held that moments of insight, the restructuring of the psychological environment that creates a new Gestalt, could change the way we view ourselves, problems, situations, and other people. Insight can restructure our life space.

Self-other understanding, through the process of facilitating social awareness, means to see one’s self (insight) stepping into the world, participating, and sharing mutual concerns with another, or, as Buber (1958) would suggest, being an “I’ for a “Thou.” Coaching and psychotherapy share the importance of heightened awareness as a goal, as the professions involve private and confidential relating. Self-exploration and interpersonal understanding are most often central to both; they both value insight.

Primarily, the distinction may lie within the work. In coaching, we help the client articulate a clearly expressed goal, create milestones and agreements to monitor the status, and anchor the work in achieving the goal and desired results. In coaching, the coach has experience, subject matter expertise, and often education or training in a specific professional practice, such as acting, singing, business, organization and management, and so on. A psychotherapist without background or training in a second field or discipline would likely not fare well, or last long, as a coach in that arena. The converse is true as well: a coach without experience, training, and education in psychotherapy would encounter his or her limits very quickly. The systems would quickly eject those without qualifications. Unfortunately, whether therapist or coach, the process could damage the client before the lack of competence revealed itself.

How do you distinguish coaching from therapy? Do you make the distinction? How do you hold those distinctions, or, said differently, how much weight do you give them? Are they really important and meaningful? Can they be helpful? Do they support either coaching or therapy as a separate profession?

All of us hit our limits. Knowing our boundaries is important. How do we know if what we offer is supportive enough and when it is not enough? What other support might the client need? What support might we need? For us, the question is not about the difference between coaching and psychotherapy, but rather: How is it that we, as persons, act responsibly in relation to what unfolds before us?

Yet, in the end, our commitment is to a belief that the theory of Gestalt therapy, with its primary orientation toward relationship in time and place, provides a useful roadmap for making and modeling responsible (and response-able) contact in our professional work as coaches or psychotherapists, and most importantly, in our lives.

What is Coaching?

Generally understood, coaching certainly has as its essence: learning new skills, knowledge, and behaviors—the right combination of challenge and support—from a person with whom you feel connected to improve performance, reach a goal of your own choosing, and grow personally.
Executive coaching practice stresses the need for a change in the way the client thinks. The idea is to affect change by getting at the thinking that drives behavior, viz., unquestioned beliefs and assumptions and “maps” for how the world works and how to get things done. This can apply to individuals or groups. For organizations, the “map” is the organizational culture, or “How we do things around here.”

Two books widely read by coaches are Robert Hargrove’s (1995) Masterful Coaching and Mary Beth O’Neill’s (2000) Coaching with Backbone and Heart. Both books stress the importance of a results orientation. Hargrove speaks about commitments; O’Neill, about the leader’s issue or challenge. The work lies within the framework of learning. O’Neill described coaching as an action learning process and organized her approach and the book around the stages of that process. Hargrove’s methodology was transformational learning. He presented a hierarchy, levels of learning which transcend and include the step of embodying new skills and capabilities (changes in action), through learning to do fundamentally different things (change in thinking/strategies/reframing), to personal transformation (changes in identity). His book is about the latter.

Both Hargrove and O’Neill have made significant contributions to coaching practice. Their methods and approaches are illustrative of the standard practice of coaching. What we share in common with both is a commitment to awareness. However, based on what we heard in the interviews, and given our own experience in research and practice, our interests lie in aspects Hargrove and O’Neill did not bring to light in their work, or where the light is dim. Gestalt theory and practice have distinct contributions to make in several aspects of coaching; a few of those are present in what follows. We invite readers unfamiliar with Gestalt to explore these areas.

First, relationship, or more broadly, contact, is primary in Gestalt. Our coaching work is in the relational domain. The evidence from the interviews supports our pointing to the relationship. What stands out for us is how, time and again, we heard clients refer to the person by name and not their training; for example, Gestalt, or the techniques they employed. They wondered: Was it ___________ (fill in coach’s name) or Gestalt? In many cases, the clients had no knowledge of the coach’s training background. They attributed satisfaction and success to their experience with a particular person.

The locus of the work, for most coaches, is primarily the individual and cognitive or cognitive-behavioral. O’Neill (2000), more than any other popular writers on coaching, is sensitive to the role of relationship. Yet she uses the term “self-differentiation.” While she acknowledges the dual import of simultaneously making a judgment and taking a stand (backbone), and staying connected (heart), the label favors one end of the polarity. Our work happens in the relational domain—the space between people—not just in individuals and collectives. It is more immediate: what is happening between you and me right now. We tend to focus here, the territory that Buber labeled the interhuman realm, rather than on intrapsychic contents or cognition of individuals or the abstract characteristics of collectives. Hargrove’s methodology, transformational learning, has a foundation of academic literature overwhelmingly concerned with individuals and cognition.
Most of the research and writing on transformative learning examines what occurs with individual persons with a focus on cognitive and behavioral change, and more recently, on transformation in body and soul. Some research and writing also examines social and cultural change. So, significant work occurs at the individual level, and some at the social or group level, but little in the domain of relationship between particular persons—in the space between us—where particular individuals, the group as a whole, and the space between are all transformed. (Leahy & Gilly, 2009, p. 23)

Transformational coaching results in a complete makeover, a total cognitive reorganization and a new identity. This does not describe our work.

Next, another difference is that Gestalt distinguishes awareness from introspection.

Awareness is the spontaneous sensing of what arises in you—of what you are doing, feeling, planning. Introspection, in contrast, is a deliberate turning of attention to these activities in an evaluating, correcting, controlling, interfering way, which often, by the very attention paid them, modifies or prevents their appearance in awareness (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1980, p. 88)

Coaching? What are you working on? And, how might you answer these questions differently, having heard about the experience of Gestalt coaches and clients?

Most of our readers, regular subscribers to this journal, are familiar with Gestalt, whether it be therapy, coaching, or consulting. We would like to make Gestalt available and accessible, if not immediately assimilable, to coaches and to students in coaching programs who are unfamiliar with Gestalt. For those of you who are unfamiliar with Gestalt, a taste of the Gestalt approach follows, accompanied by the proverbial salt. Gestalt therapy was never intended to be able to be captured in three bullets. One of the values of Gestalt is that people experience something, taste it for themselves, and are not force-fed the dish. Taste varies with recipe, so hold what we say lightly. This is our view, not the view. For those of you who are Gestaltists, we are aware of the danger of moving into this territory. Yet we wonder: How do we take what might be esoteric and make it more widely available?

Laura Perls (1978), in a talk wherein she outlined the basic concepts of Gestalt and dismantled misconceptions, had this to say about Gestalt: “The basic concepts of Gestalt therapy are philosophical and aesthetic rather than technical. Gestalt therapy is an existential-phenomenological approach, and as such, it is experiential and experimental.” Concerning the concepts themselves, she named three. We are going to use plain English and not Gestalt terms and we will try to communicate these concepts simply, knowing this is incomplete. The concepts include an interest in

1. The activity of recognizing and coping with the other. That other could be a person, or more generally, the new, different, and strange.
2. The experience of that “place,” the border, where we meet the other,\(^1\) which includes both touching or coming together and recognizing that we are separate\(^2\). We chose to notice something at this border and experience excitement in a variety of forms: interest, curiosity, fear, hostility. Sometimes we are blocked, we have a tough time noticing things and/or don’t feel excitement. We feel anxiety.

3. **How we support ourselves, and get support from others**, to make it possible for us to experience excitement, creativity, and growth at that border.

Laura Perls is clear—Gestalt is not a set of techniques. How we practice Gestalt, how we bring these concepts into action, very much differs from one practitioner to the next.

How we do facilitate this development of more elastic support functions in our patients depends on the support we have in ourselves and our awareness of what is available in our clients. A good therapist does not use techniques. He applies himself in and to a situation with whatever knowledge skills and total life experience have become integrated into his own background and whatever awareness he has any given moment. Thus, I would speak of styles of therapy rather than techniques. Nearly any technical modality is applicable within the framework of gestalt therapy, if it is existential, experiential, and experimental only to the degree that support can be mobilized, e.g., if the patient is already or can be made aware of what and how he is doing and willing to experiment with expansions or alternatives. (Perls, 1977)

Let us close by telling you how we each practice and what draws us to Gestalt.

Let me (Mark) start by telling you my experience of Gestalt coaching and therapy. In the interest of economy, I offer and comment on a few key statements.

What seems obvious? When I am sitting with a client, I often ask myself, “What seems obvious?” I am attending to what is unfolding, what is emerging, what is taking form.

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\(^1\) We emphasize contact between persons and the boundary between those persons. This is what our interviewees spoke about. And, our emphasis is hardly surprising given our work—coaching. There are Gestaltists who would challenge this; they might point to Fritz Perls’s original biological explanation, the larger field of an organism’s contact with the environment in which a person might be a figure of interest in that larger environment. We see no conflict here, though respect that others might. Apparently, Laura Perls saw complementarity: “What Buber calls meeting what we call contact; that is, dialogue with the other as other… Experience is on the boundary of where you and I meet” (as cited in Friedman, 1985, p. 89).

Richard Hycner adds a useful distinction: “All dialogue is contact—not all contact is dialogue” (1995, p. 92). This makes it clear that we are interested in a particular kind of contact.

\(^2\) Lynne Jacobs said, “Buber says that dialogic relation unifies the person’s soul and makes the person whole (Friedman, 1976b, p. 97), whereas in Gestalt therapy, wholeness comes through awareness (Latner, 1973, p. 55). Actually, Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman stress contact, with awareness as a subset but for many Gestalt practitioners awareness has become the major focus, while contact has receded into the background. For me, all three positions are intimately related. *Dialogue, contact, and awareness are all aspects of a single whole*. Hycner (1985) believes that a dialogical Gestalt therapy would not take awareness as a goal, but rather the restoration of full dialogue (1995, p. 60, italics original).”
So we start with the obvious, with what is immediately available to the awareness of therapist as well as client, and we proceed from there in small steps which are immediately experienced and thus are more easily assimilable. (Perls, 1977)

Responsible contact is fundamental. As clients sit across from me, I am wondering where they are, noticing what I am experiencing in relation to them, and whether or not it would be useful to share that in a way that could be helpful.

I find myself wanting to know the persons. Who are they? How are they with me? How are they with others? I am thinking all of this because...

I want to be helpful to them. At each moment, we are in a process of evolving from who we have been to who we are becoming. Gestalt is an experiential, dialogical, and integrative approach to self-discovery and personal growth. Through compassionate understanding, confirmation of each person’s uniqueness, attention to present-moment experience, and heightened awareness, we can complete what is unfinished from the past and give way to our emerging creative selves. Understanding how processes can function to sustain disruptive patterns, as well as challenging and supporting the possibilities for creative problem-solving, can lead to deliberate actions that transform relationships between people, as well as between people and organizations.

It’s my (Martin’s) turn. I am interested in individual people and groups and in how they struggle together with questions of abiding concern. My work is for them and their goals.

Gestalt and dialogue offer me a philosophy for a way of living. Thus, my coaching is comprised of practices from that philosophy. According to Pierre Hadot (1995), in ancient Greece, philosophy was seen as a way of life, one that was shared with others and sustained by spiritual practices. Spiritual, for Hadot, meant replacing my perspective with the perspective of the Whole, which results in a transformation of my vision of the world, my personality, and leads to an authentic way of living with others.

Philosophy did not consist in teaching an abstract theory—much less in the exegesis of—texts, but rather in the art of living. (p. 83)

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Pierre Hadot (1995), philosopher and historian of philosophy, asserted scholars have many mistaken notions about ancient philosophy that interfere with our ability to hear what those philosophers said in their writing. Most prominent among these distortions are that philosophy is about (a) abstraction, (b) system building, (c) writing, and (d) falling back on the self alone. These distortions are a result of twisting the texts through a modern mindset wherein the tacit expectations depict the text as a theoretical argument based on a way of knowing that weds sense perception with rational analysis.

Hadot told us ancient Greek philosophy was the quest for virtue or the principles that could support individuals and a community in the practice of a virtuous life. The goal was to employ practices for living a good life and inquiring into the knowledge that warranted those practices: the why behind the how.
Ever since I started doing philosophy, I’ve always believed that philosophy was a concrete act, which changed our perception of the world, and our life, not the construction of a system. It is a life, not a discourse. (pp. 83, 279)

Dialogue is the central act or practice of philosophy; it “forms people and transforms souls” (Hadot, 1995, p. 20).

Among the spiritual practices of ancient philosophy, Hadot found attention or being present, meditation, research, reading, listening, indifference to indifferent things, accomplishment of duties, self-mastery, and remembrances of good things (p. 84). In following these practices, people would abandon habits, question social conventions like the pursuit of wealth and recognition, and ultimately, this knowing, which was fundamentally spiritual work, altered the being of the one who knows.

I work at meeting others, allowing myself to be met, and helping others to create the time and space for true meeting. Since 1995, I have felt a magnetic pull toward Martin Buber. I have only read his work, but it feels as if he has been my unseen professor and spiritual director. Buber’s work is dialogue, dia, or across, and logos. Logos, a much misunderstood term, comes originally from Heraclitus, the “you can’t step in the same river twice” guy. Heraclitus, according to at least one scholar, understood logos as energy, fire, the force that held the world together amidst all that change and chaos. Buber might have had that in mind when he said, “When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly, God is the electricity that surges between them.”

I carry on a conversation and coach other people in carrying on conversations. The conversation is in support of new ways of being in relationship. Buber said,

No system was suitable for what I had to say. Structure was suitable for it, a compact structure but not one that joined everything together.... I must say it once again: I have no teaching. I only point to something. I point to reality. I point to something in reality that had not or had too little been seen. I take him who listens to me by the hand and lead him to the window. I open the window and point to what is outside. I have no teaching, but I carry on a conversation. (Buber, 1967, p. 693)

Buber was pointing to what he called the “interhuman,” the space between us that is neither individual nor collective. Now, I love systems, theories, and models. I am at home in my head. The therapists among you will not have to work hard to understand why I lean toward explaining the world

5 I am not alone in this feeling. Richard Hycner (1995) tells us: “It is inconceivable to me to steep myself in a dialogical approach without recognizing a spiritual or transpersonal dimension. I feel more and more than in my best therapeutic moments, I am present to, and sometimes the instrument of, some spiritual reality. (p. 93)”

6 Dialogue is more than conversation. Hadot (1995) said: One of Plato’s greatest merits will always be that he was able, via the myth of Socrates/Eros, to introduce into the philosophical life the dimension of love -- that is of desire and the irrational.... The task of dialogue consists essentially in pointing out the limits of language, and its inability to communicate moral and existential experience.... Socratic philosophy is not the solitary elaboration of a system, but the awakening of consciousness, and accession to a level of being which can only be reached in a person-to-person relationship. (p. 163)"
before I experience it. But as much as I am drawn to reading, ideas, and two-by-two matrices, they are no substitute for those times when I feel that I have been met by another person, or met another, or helped others create the space for true meeting.

Awareness is not enough. I have found insight to be insufficient for change, whether in myself or with my clients. A different kind of awareness and a relationship are essential. The beliefs, assumptions, and maps we carry around had their origin in intimate relationships and are not easy to drop: “There is one true Church.” So, I took a belief fed to me as a child by the most important people in my life and I have had a hard time shaking it off. I am aware that this might sound indulgent, but I think I am not alone; only the particulars vary. I took something that belonged to other people and consumed it well before I could even distinguish what I did and did not like. I identified with the belief and with the believers. And so, in coaching, awareness, even Gestalt awareness, is not enough. As someone said, you can have all of the information and insight imaginable, but that rarely resolves an impasse; you still have a dilemma. A trusted, intimate other is essential for deconstructing, reconstructing, and making a choice. I have found this said nowhere as simply and profoundly as asserted by Philip Lichtenberg: “The delusion of fusion exists only in the context of social relationships and so can be rectified only in social relationships” (Lichtenberg, 1990, p. 85).
References


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Martin is an organization development consultant with 25+ years experience including work as an executive, consultant, teacher, researcher, and writer in the field. Consulting engagements have taken him from Rustbelt mills and factories to Wall Street, Vatican City, a Navajo reservation in the Southwest, and the headquarters of many of the *Fortune* 500 including Aventis Pasteur, Bethlehem Steel, Burger King, Chase, ETS, Exxon, Holiday Inns, IBM, Mack Trucks, Mobil, Pfizer, The Hartford and Takeda America. In his own practice since 1994, he earlier worked for 15 years with two national consulting firms, led national practices (with P&L responsibility), and served on the executive committees of both.

A relational theory (Buber, Rogers) of dialogue guides his work. Consulting projects have included: off-site retreats, teambuilding, leadership development, organizational assessment and diagnosis, culture, participatory strategic planning, vision/mission/values work, and coaching for teams and individuals.

He holds a Ph.D., Human & Organizational Development, and an M.A., Human Development, from Fielding Graduate University and a B.A., Philosophy, from the University of New Orleans. He completed a three year training program in Gestalt therapy at the Gestalt Therapy Institute of Philadelphia. Martin is an associate professor, PhD program in Organizational Leadership, at The Chicago School of Professional Psychology where he teaches leadership and qualitative research methods and directs doctoral research.

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Mark is a licensed and board-certified clinical social worker. He has more than 29 years of experience working with individuals, couples, families, groups, and organizations as a psychotherapist, educator, coach and consultant. He has worked with small and family-owned businesses as well as Fortune 500 companies and spent 10 years as an executive and clinical director for a managed behavioral health care organization.

For much of his life, Mark has explored a wide range of humanistic practices. He is interested in group process; creativity; intimate relational systems; personal growth; the use of contemplative practice; and individual, team, and organizational performance.

Mark earned a B.A. in Human Services and an M.ED. in Education and Psychology from Antioch College. He received an M.S.S. in Clinical Social Work from Bryn Mawr College and a Ph.D. in Human and Organizational Behavior from International University for Graduate Studies. He has postgraduate training in a variety of theoretical orientations, including Gestalt Therapy, Psychodrama, Transactional Analysis, Family Therapy, Interactive Group Process, Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy, Neuro-Linguistic Programming, Clinical Hypnosis, NTL, and the OD Practitioners Program. Mark is a faculty member of the Gestalt Therapy Institute of Philadelphia, a member of the Next Generation of the Gestalt International Study Center, and has provided numerous workshops and trainings in the U.S. and abroad. He is a principal of GestaltWorks, an Organizational Consulting group, and maintains a private practice in New Hope and Newtown, Pennsylvania.

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