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## Re-Visioning Personal Myths In Executive Coaching

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Submitted to the Program of Organizational Dynamics, College of Liberal and Professional Studies in the School of Arts and Sciences in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Philosophy in Organizational Dynamics at the University of Pennsylvania  
Advisor: Linda Pennington

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## Re-Visioning Personal Myths In Executive Coaching

### Abstract

The purpose of this capstone is to study how executive coaches use stories to help their clients author a more empowering personal myth, in support of the client's long-term vision that accounts for diverse personal and professional stakeholders. Through a multidisciplinary review of literature, the study enunciates how people create personal myths to make sense of their lives and why those invisible myths need to be continuously updated to account for life changes. The review of organizational research emphasizes the importance of choosing an archetype that supports a desired social identity at work. Following interviews with experienced coach practitioners, the study outlines a process by which coaches can ask for stories that not only help clients change but also lay the foundation of the deeper work clients need to do to articulate and realize their future vision. At the core of the long-term personal transformation is the need to evoke a way of being that allows clients to "be their best self."

### Keywords

executive coaching, long-term personal transformation

### Disciplines

Organizational Behavior and Theory

### Comments

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RE-VISIONING PERSONAL MYTHS IN EXECUTIVE COACHING

by

Atif Iqbal

Submitted to the Program of Organizational Dynamics,

College of Liberal and Professional Studies

in the School of Arts and Sciences

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Philosophy in Organizational Dynamics at the

University of Pennsylvania

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

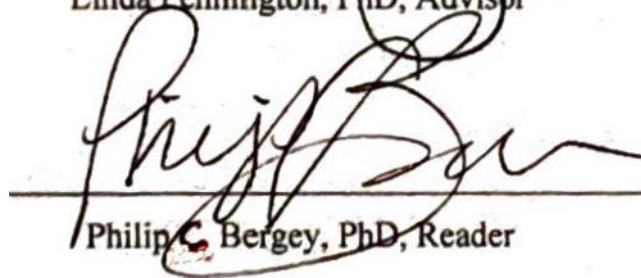
2020

RE-VISIONING PERSONAL MYTHS IN EXECUTIVE COACHING

Approved by:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Linda Pennington". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "L".

Linda Pennington, PhD, Advisor

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Philip C. Bergey". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "P".

Philip C. Bergey, PhD, Reader

## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this capstone is to study how executive coaches use stories to help their clients author a more empowering personal myth, in support of the client's long-term vision that accounts for diverse personal and professional stakeholders. Through a multidisciplinary review of literature, the study enunciates how people create personal myths to make sense of their lives and why those invisible myths need to be continuously updated to account for life changes. The review of organizational research emphasizes the importance of choosing an archetype that supports a desired social identity at work. Following interviews with experienced coach practitioners, the study outlines a process by which coaches can ask for stories that not only help clients change but also lay the foundation of the deeper work clients need to do to articulate and realize their future vision. At the core of the long-term personal transformation is the need to evoke a way of being that allows clients to "be their best self."

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I also thank other faculty members in the Organizational Dynamics program at the University of Pennsylvania including Dr. Janet Greco for the classes in Storytelling and Myths in Media that informed my research interests; Dr. Alan Barstow for teaching the capstone class and spotlighting its importance at all Organizational Dynamics events (Alan's humility and personal interest in helping students flourish is one of the reasons behind the success of the program); and Dr. Charline Russo for investing a lot of time, energy, and consideration in serving as my academic advisor, and I'm grateful to her for that.

One of the professors from my undergraduate days, Professor Fazle Hasan, used to exhort us to never forget the grace and kindness of a benefactor. Authors, he asserted, are owed a debt of gratitude so he would always refer to books by their author, not title. Although it's not possible for me to list all the authors I owe for enriching me on this journey, four authors come to mind (listed in chronological order of becoming familiar with their work): Dan McAdams for introducing me to *The Stories We Live By*; David Drake for his book *Narrative Coaching*, which I appreciate more and more as my coaching hours grow; and Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke for their work on Thematic Analysis, which is as elegant a way to analyze qualitative research as it is simple to use.

Finally, I thank the enduring love of my life, my late mother. She's the reason why stories nourish me. As a child, I was underweight and irregular with my meals. To correct this, she'd read a story to me at mealtimes, timing the delivery to ensure that its end coincided with my last bite because I'd stop eating once the story was over. She selflessly poured her heart and soul into raising me as a good human being, even if what she had in mind was a character in a Jane Austen novel. It's no secret to people who know me that I've lived my life trying my best to do her proud. And, like Irvin Yalom, the words now stuck in my throat are: "Momma! How'd I do, Momma? How'd I do?"

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*“A man is always a teller of tales, he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, he sees everything that happens to him through them; and he tries to live his life as if he were telling a story.”* – Jean-Paul Sartre (as cited in McAdams, 1993, p. 17)

In this chapter, I share the story that inspired me to write this capstone. I start with the aha moment, which sparked my interest in the research topic; and then introduce the power of stories, the functions of life stories, the different forms of life stories, and why myths are the particular form of life stories that interest me.

#### Capstone Background

*“The most important question we can ask ourselves is ‘What myth are we living?’”* – Carl Jung (as cited in Keen & Valley-Fox, 1989, p. xv)

“Could you tell me someone you admire? A hero or a favorite character in literature or movies?” I asked the client.

“Saadat Hasan Manto,” he responded without hesitation, then smiled.

It all fell into place for me then. The client, a fifty-year-old entrepreneur of Pakistani origin based out of Singapore, had been an enigma to me until that moment. My previous (intake) session with him had led me to ponder whether the client was guarded by nature, in denial, or just giving me answers that he believed I wanted to hear. He had engaged me to help him be seen as a team player within his organization after his peers

had questioned his emotional intelligence in the 360 degree feedback process. But as a man of superior intellect, he wasn't ready yet to let anyone help him.

While we shared the same national origin, he wasn't aware that I'd recently developed an interest in Manto,<sup>1</sup> who was a master of his craft: short stories. The client's worldview now made sense to me, but I continued to clarify and avoid assumptions.

“Why is that?”

“He spoke the truth. No matter how bitter. Regardless of consequences. No interest in saying what people wanted to hear. Lived his life regardless of prevailing social norms of what's acceptable and what's not.”

I leaned forward and said, “And to what extent does that hold true for you as well? In what ways are you Manto in your life?”

As the realization hit him and he sank into his chair, I continued. “What have you gained from being Manto? What have you lost?”

With that aha moment, I established credibility with the client, and our relationship took off to the extent that the client was later able to achieve the agreed upon coaching outcomes.

I had been coaching clients for over a year then, and while I had always been interested in using narrative to understand the client's identity and meaning-making, I hadn't explicitly tried to use media stories for that purpose. But after reading McAdams's (1993) life story interviews, I was encouraged to ask that particular question with a

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<sup>1</sup> A master of his short stories craft, Manto gained fame posthumously for writing about the hard truths of society in a way that no one else did in his era in the Indian subcontinent. Manto died at age 43 years, unheralded, but was prosecuted repeatedly by governments—both after the Partition of India and by the British before Indian independence.

difficult-to-read client. From that day, I have used a variant of that question with clients to discover an identity that informs their worldview.

Then one day I wondered what it would be like if I were to ask clients to assume a narrative for the future that would support their goals for the coaching. After all, visualization is a common practice in coaching in which the coach invites the client to imagine a desired future state or self. So why not instead use a story incorporating logos, ethos, and pathos?

That led me to become curious in learning about the ways in which coaches currently use storytelling with their clients to both understand *and* author their life story.

### **The Past Is Prologue**

As I reflected on my experience with identity, I remembered a pivotal moment in my own past when I had found meaning in a new identity. I had just been rejected by the PhD programs I'd applied to, after quitting my job in a leading global bank. The personal crisis wasn't simply that I had truly failed, or that for the first time in my life I didn't know what to aspire for or work toward; it was more that I had no identity after a few life events in quick succession. I didn't have the language for it back then, but all the significant imagoes<sup>2</sup> (McAdams, 1993) in my life had gone out the window: the dutiful son, the successful executive, a banker, a New Yorker. And while I had recently received my citizenship, I didn't know who I was just yet: American? Pakistani-American? I certainly didn't see myself as a Pakistani anymore.

While I had recently read many books about life purpose and calling, I found what was more helpful to me than knowing what color is my parachute was the

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<sup>2</sup> Imago: A term used sometimes by Carl Jung to refer to archetypes, a universal thought form charged with emotion.

recognition of an enduring identity in my life: one of a Guide (or Helper). That identity, and (from memory) an image of a man holding a lamp, was invaluable to me in making sense of and charting my future course of action: embracing coaching as a career. Thus, given my own experience, I became interested in studying whether inviting coaching clients to consciously craft a new personal myth for their future—one that allows for the integration of different characters and archetypes—could be helpful on their journey of personal transformation.

### **The Power of Stories**

*“Without Story, information is nothing but a lot of bricks lying about waiting for someone to make constructive use out of them.” – Aidan Chambers (1983, p. 340)*

Stories...inform, inspire, teach, maintain moral codes, record events that become history, establish family ties and genealogy, preserve customs, guide us, show us possibilities, open our hearts, make us laugh, and clarify all aspects of life while healing and transforming....Story is a tool for making us whole; stories gather up the parts of us and put them together in a way that gives our lives greater meaning that they had before we told our story. Story is a tool for self-discovery; stories tell us new things about ourselves that we wouldn't have been aware of without having told the story. (Atkinson, 1995, p. 3)

When we impose a narrative framework on the raw material of our lives, we bring new structure and clarity to something familiar to us. Storytelling enables people to discover a voice through which they can validate their experience so they can communicate, debate, and share it with others. The transformative power of stories lies in showing us how our experience is linked to that of other human beings, and while our

own situation or experience may be unique, at the same time and at its core, it is both common to others and timeless.

Telling our life stories also allows us to exercise our imagination and fantasies, impacting the self-image or identity we hold for ourselves. Through our imagination we use our power to form mental images of not just what is actually present but also what we would like to be present (Atkinson, 1995). When we tell stories we often create new mental images of things that never actually were, but that can help us become who we want to be by integrating previous experiences in a form that makes more sense to us combined than they do as individual elements. Thus, by using our inner strengths, such as creativity, we can author stories that have the power to transform ourselves (Keen & Valley-Fox, 1989).

### **The Functions of Life Stories**

*“We tell ourselves stories in order to live....We interpret what we see, select the most workable of the multiple choices. We live entirely...by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the ‘ideas’ with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria—which is our actual experience.”* – Joan Didion (1979, p. 11)

Our life stories serve multiple functions. They bring us more into accord with ourselves, others, the mystery of life, and the universe around us (Atkinson, 1995).

**Psychological function.** By telling our life stories, we can gain a clearer understanding of our experiences, our feelings about them, and consequently, what they mean to us. When we tell our stories, we can view our lives both subjectively and objectively. Traditional societies fulfilled this function by social rites of passage and stories about them that served as a guide to human behavior.

**Social function.** Stories allow us to affirm and validate our own experience in relation to those around us. When we share our story with others, we can understand what we have in common with others, which makes us feel more connected to them. We become more aware of the range of roles and standards that exist within the broader community, thus clarifying and maintaining our self within the social order of things.

**Spiritual function.** Stories connect us to the soul of life. By telling our stories we can transcend the personal and enter the realm of the sacred. Stories awaken a feeling of wonder and reverence toward life itself. What we emphasize the most in our stories shows us what is most important to us, what we are seeking, what our struggles are, what our greatest victories are, and where our deepest values lie. Our stories tell us what our potential is, what we most want to do, what our quest has been, where we are broken, and where we are most authentically us.

**Cosmological function.** Telling our stories helps bring clarity to how we see the world, the universe around us, and our role and place within it. The lives we live, and the stories we tell about our lives, show an image of the world and the universe of which we are a part. Our life story also presents a view of how we would like the world to look ideally.

### **Forms of Personal Stories**

Atkinson (1995) has categorized personal stories to include life story, autobiography, and personal myth.

A life story is the story a person chooses to tell about the life they have lived and what they want others to know about it. It includes the important events, experiences, and feelings of a lifetime, as the person remembers them.

An autobiography is a more formal written story of a person's life. It can also consist of shorter pieces that focus on one event or memory, or an important life transition.

A personal myth is a way of expressing the universals of life: the experiences, events, and feelings that have been part of the human experience forever. It focuses on the experiences, motifs, and themes that have ordered, shaped, and directed our lives. Personal myth begins in the moment you say: "This is vital to me" (Bond, 2001, p. x).

### **Why Study Myth?**

*"A myth isn't simply the search for meaning, it is the experience of life"* – Joseph Campbell (1988, p. 5)

I was reluctant to embrace *myth* (as opposed to *narrative*) for my study for few words have been misconstrued as much as myth. The word suggests a "lie," "fabrication," "illusion," "mistake," or something similar. It is the opposite of something that is a "fact" and of what is "reality." In this usage, myth is at best a silly story and at worst a cynical untruth (Keen & Valley-Fox, 1989). Myths are seen as deceptions to be exposed, debunked, and rejected.

Such trivialization of myth reflects a belief in humankind as rational beings. The dominant paradigm is one that prizes the supremacy of scientific reasoning to answer questions about how things are, technology to give us the power to change what we don't like, and economic theory to determine how we spend our lives. All these functions have traditionally been performed by cultural myths.

While in its original form, myth was rooted in emotion rather than rationality, contemporary myth-making is subject to rational logic and empirical standards of validity



(Cousineau, 2001). Behavioral scientists have come to realize that both linear and narrative modes of thought are complementary and play a critical role in reasoning. Only by integrating them can we construct a more sophisticated reality.

What inspires me about myths is: (1) they are in our cultural DNA; and (2) their “once and future” nature. Myth is the part of our self that awakens our consciousness according to the needs of time and place, and leads us to the promise of who we are meant to be. According to Bowles (1993), “Myths express in ways that we are not able to articulate, our feelings, thoughts, consciousness, or sense of our own behavior” (p. 414). Myths are eternal dramas that are living themselves out repeatedly in our personal lives and in what we see all around us (Edinger, 1994). Myths evoke the eternal because they explore the timeless concerns of human beings—birth, death, time, good and evil, creativity, competition, heroism, discovery, and destruction (Cousineau, 2001). A myth is a *sacred narrative* that puts us in touch with the awesome mystery within and beyond all things (Grice, 2013). Myth carries forward collective visions of the hopes and battles that make life worthwhile (Chalquist, 2009).

When we decide to work together with myths a rich and vast new world of experience opens up to us that can mentor and inform our lives. We can explore with Odysseus, grapple with the complexity of relationships with Lancelot, and die and be reborn with Jesus. The details of our existence find clarity and amplification in the universals of the greater story and the larger-than-life characters of the myth (Feinstein & Krippner, 2007).

Armstrong (2005) finds a similarity between myth and art: Both spheres can transform the human psyche, not through persuasive and discursive methods but through

experience in that art in the cultures of the past served as a vehicle for spiritual revelation. A myth is then a sacred story; it is both a way for culture to reach our spiritual sphere and for us to recognize, understand, and act on our unconscious desires, extending the boundaries of our story.

### **The Need to Re-Vision Myths**

A living myth, similar to an iceberg, is 10% visible and 90% beneath the surface of consciousness. While it involves a conscious celebration (or dislike) of certain values, which are personified in a pantheon of heroes (from the wily Ulysses to the visionary Steve Jobs) and villains (from the betraying Judas to the barbarous Pol Pot), it also includes our habitual way of seeing things, unquestioned assumptions, and default positions (Keen & Valley-Fox, 1989).

Myths give us identity and, in a way, identity is a compulsion for repetition: putting on a consistent face before the world. If we are frustrated or bored, it is because of paths we have not explored. Few of us have the self-awareness to know the characters and emotions that inhabit the theater of our minds. We are encouraged to tell a single (“true”) story and construct a consistent character. We are, thus, defined more by neglected possibilities than by ones we realize (Keen & Valley-Fox, 1989).

This state of “neglected possibilities” is best described by the following Sufi story:

Unjustly imprisoned, a tinsmith was allowed to receive a rug woven by his wife. He prostrated himself upon the rug day after day to say his prayers and after some time he said to his jailers:

“I am poor and without hope, and you are wretchedly paid. Bring me tin and tools and I shall make small artifacts which you can sell in the market, and we will both benefit.”

The guards agreed to this, and soon the tinsmith and they were both making a profit, from which they bought food and comfort for themselves.

Then, one day, when the guards went to the cell, the door was open, and he was gone.

Many years later, when this man’s innocence had been established, the man who had imprisoned him asked him how he had escaped, what magic he had used. The tinsmith said:

“It is a matter of design, and design within design. My wife is a weaver. She found the man who had made the locks of the cell door, and got the design from him. This she wove into the rug, at the spot where my head touched in prayer five times a day. I am a metal-worker, and after a while this design looked to me like the inside of a lock. I designed the plan of the artifacts to obtain the materials to make the key – and I escaped.” (Shah, 1971, p. 171)

The Sufi story can be a metaphor for the condition of those of us who live our lives within the narrow confines of how we see ourselves and the world around us. Thoughts, feelings, and behaviors get repeated in our lives. Stuck in the same pattern, people are so deeply shackled to their tales of sacrifice, victimhood, and other matters that they can’t imagine an alternative telling of the story of their lives that has more personal agency. But from the perspective of those outside the prison, what we see as reality only represents a small fraction of all that is available to us.

The greatest freedom for the individual comes from the love of many stories and knowing the danger of a single story. We gain personal authority and power when we question the myth we are living and discover and create a new personal myth that guides our actions. The etymology of “authority” and “authorship” informs us of the power inherent in each. To reinvent ourselves, we must weave new themes into our life narratives, re-vision our future, and reauthorize the myth by which we live (Keen & Valley-Fox, 1989). But if there are a number of ways to view our story, how can we choose one to live that makes us feel inspired and hopeful?

After examining existing literature I recognized a gap in the published research around explicitly using a new/updated personal myth during executive coaching. At the same time market outreach made me aware that coaches not only use narrative techniques to create greater awareness in clients of a story they might be living, but that some coaches explicitly invite the client to live a new story. Thus, the purpose of my capstone research is to study how executive coaches use storytelling with their clients and how, and to what extent, they help clients re-vision their personal myth<sup>3</sup> to support clients’ desired goals and transformation.

### **Capstone Outline**

The chapters in the capstone are organized as follows:

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the literature reviewed related to the constructs of personal myth and mythology, archetypes in leadership and in organizations, the impact of cultural stories on identity, and the use of narratives in coaching, as well as the

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<sup>3</sup> Recognizing the cultural biases that prevail regarding the word “myth,” other than for academic practitioners, in my interviews I replaced “personal myth” with “central story” or “life story.” In a few instances, the interviewee used the term “plotlines” instead so my follow-up questions accordingly used “plotlines” for consistency.

risk of being sucked into stereotypes within groups and organizations in the absence of consciously electing and evoking a “deep role” based on fairy tales and myths.

In Chapter 3 I present the methodology that I used in my capstone research. It includes a description of the process used in collecting and analyzing data related to my research questions. I interviewed 10 highly experienced coaching practitioners with diverse backgrounds in terms of sex, ethnicity, geography, and coaching model or approach; I included coaches with their own executive coaching practice who had earlier served as internal coaches. Internal coaches, I learned, rely even more on stories as they often are unable to conduct a formal intake with many of their clients; they presented rich data on how they employ narrative in their coaching.

Chapter 4 includes my interpretation of the data I collected. To provide supporting evidence, I have made extensive use of anonymous quotations from the interviewees.

In Chapter 5 I share what I learned in terms of a process executive coaches can follow within their own practice, my own conclusions and interpretations of what I gathered from the data, and follow-on research that interests me.

## CHAPTER 2

### Literature Review

Given the research questions, the literature review focuses on understanding myths and personal mythology, and the use of archetypes as building blocks of myths, fairy tales, and media stories in organizational settings. It also (briefly) introduces the field of Narrative Coaching and the use of *the monomyth* (“The Hero’s Journey”) in executive coaching.

The first section focuses on personal mythology and outlines (1) the role of cultural myths to guide traditional societies; (2) the definition of a personal myth; (3) how personal myths provide meaning; (4) the role of personal mythology in integrating different myths and constructing and explaining reality; and (5) the need to re-author personal myths to help people successfully navigate their lives.

The next section reviews the role of cultural and media studies in shaping identity and interpreting reality. In understanding the language of personal change, it’s helpful to note that childhood provides plenty of experience in re-authoring stories to suit one’s needs.

The field of Narrative Coaching is fairly nascent; the first book (still available in print) on this subject, *Narrative Coaching*, by Drake (2018) was first published in 2017. Drake’s Narrative Coaching model is based on the monomyth: The Hero’s Journey, as described in Campbell’s (1949) seminal work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

Since limited research had been done on the use of mythology in organizational settings, in order to study leadership and executive coaching the literature review highlights research that leverages the fields (e.g., Jungian, Archetypal, and Depth

Psychology) on which personal mythology is based. Accordingly, it outlines archetypes in organizational settings including: (1) the use of archetypes in leadership studies; (2) how to work with archetypes to re-vision myth; and (3) how one can be unconsciously sucked into (attributional) roles unless one makes a conscious effort and elects archetypes to support personal and professional goals.

### **Personal Mythology**

Mythology is the original form of self-help psychology. For millennia, human beings have used myths, fairy tales, and folk tales to understand the mysteries of life and deal with them—from change of seasons (and, by extension, change itself) and the rituals around them through complex relationship issues (i.e., parent-offspring, relationship triangles) to existential concerns around the meaning of life, death, freedom, and purpose. Jesus explained his teachings through parables. Plato communicated abstract philosophical concepts using myths and allegories. In ancient Hindu medicine, when someone with mental or emotional difficulties consulted a doctor the physician offered a story on which to meditate, helping the patient find his or her own solution to the problem. It is our post-enlightenment emphasis on linear, rational thinking that gets in the way of awareness, imagination, and choice to manage life's dilemmas. "Myths have the mysterious capacity to contain and communicate paradoxes, allowing us to see through, around, and over the dilemma that is at the heart of the matter" (Greene & Sharman-Burke, 2017, p. 8).

### **What Is a Personal Myth?**

*"Myths contain the greatest story that never was, but is always happening."* –

David Feinstein and Stanley Krippner (2008, p. 100)

A personal myth is not a false belief or a story people tell themselves to explain their personal circumstances and/or behavior. It is an internal system of images, beliefs, narratives, and emotions—operating largely outside of conscious awareness—that interprets physical sensations, creates new explanations, and guides behavior. Personal myths explain the external world, support personal development, offer social cues, and address spiritual questions in a manner that is analogous to the way cultural myths carry out those functions for societies. Personal myths impact the way people perceive, feel, think, and act.

Myths are not properly judged as true or false but rather as living or dead. Myths are “true” as long as what they point at is still deeply meaningful to human beings. Myths refer to what is perceived as timeless and essential, though almost impossible to be meaningfully uttered in any literal and direct way.

Myths resonate because they have strong plots, which are repeated through the centuries and well-rehearsed and reinterpreted by different global audiences. Myths travel. They cross national boundaries and regional frontiers, resurfacing at different times in different places, preserving their ability to entertain, enlighten, and enthrall. Every society can speak of a long lineage of storytellers, plots, characters, motives, adventures, and predicaments, all of which return endlessly in new guises and twists (Gabriel, 2004).

### **Functions of Myths**

*“Myth is the eternal mirror in which we recognize ourselves.”* – J. F. Bierlein (1994, p. xiii)



One of the great healing functions of myth is to show people that they are not alone with their feelings, fears, conflicts, and aspirations. Myths show that sibling rivalry is as old as time; beauty, talent, power, and wealth each bring their own form of suffering; and in the darkness of loneliness, failure, and loss humans have always discovered light and new hope. Myths make possible both a *sense of community* as well and a *sense of personal identity* in answering Oedipus's cry: Who am I? (May, 1991).

According to Campbell (1988), myths connect two realities: the internal and the external. The external reality provides images and symbols; it gives the language and cultural systems that enable people to communicate with others. The internal reality provides understanding and awareness.

Myths are stories (including guiding images and symbols) that provide perspective and meaning to help individuals and cultures orient themselves to the requirements of living. They serve as a record of a common spiritual heritage and have inspired all the great religions and cultural worldviews. A myth provides a *living meaning* deeper and more encompassing than intellectual understanding, relevant to the heart and to the spirit as much as to the mind (Grice, 2013)

A useful way to understand the different roles myths fulfill is to keep in mind the six critical elements of the human condition as set out by the French existentialist philosopher Ricoeur, who proposed that for humans to be at peace with their lives, they need to address six issues: (1) our finitude (in terms that there are limits to human understanding and also that life itself is limited); (2) our estrangement from God and/or the numinous; (3) our process of becoming (for every human, the truth is never whole

and complete); (4) the paradox of freedom and burden of human choice; (5) our existence with and through others (everything is relational: The hero cannot become the hero without mentors, allies, and enemies); and (6) our identity and participation in the cosmos (Bierlein, 1999).

Science explains cause and effect relationships and *how* things happen. Myth answers *why* things happen in terms of purpose and meaning.

### **Personal Mythology and Construction of Reality**

Beneath one's conscious awareness, a dynamic underworld is in continuous motion, mapping one's lived reality moment by moment. Yet much like fish in the water, this personalized reality is invisible to most people. But people also have the ability to step back, examine their lived reality, and recognize it as a personal mythology to assess, articulate, and transform their lives (Feinstein & Krippner, 2008).

Feinstein used the term personal mythology to describe the "evolving construction of inner reality" and to emphasize that all human construction of reality are mythologies (2008, p. xxii). To the extent that people are unaware of the contents of their personal mythology, they carry it with them, unconsciously confusing their image of the world (their mythology or the mythology of their social group) with *the* way the world *is*.

Personal mythology is, therefore, a system of complementary as well as contradictory personal myths that organize experiences, give meaning to every situation, and guide actions. It is the lens through which people perceive the world. The values and assumptions behind one's personal mythology color all perception. Personal mythology speaks to the broad concerns of *identity* (who am I?), *direction* (where am I going?), and *purpose* (why am I going there?).

The field of Personal Mythology is informed by many schools, from ancient Greek philosophy to the methods and theories of Jungian and Freudian psychology to the practical approaches underpinning contemporary behaviorism and cognitive psychology.

### **Challenges With Personal Mythology**

While personal myths mold thoughts and behavior, they are very difficult to pin down. First, they typically operate beneath the threshold of awareness. Second, language and linear analysis do not easily capture their deep roots and dynamic nature as personal myths are circular in their effects. A personal myth influences one's experiences that shape the overarching personal mythology, which, in turn, shapes individual experiences and much more.

The personal myths that are central in one's life tend to be self-fulfilling: People are drawn to live out their underlying themes. If someone's personal mythology includes the belief that they are creative, as opposed to practical, their financial planning may also be more a work of art than a proper system of budgeting or an accurate transactional record.

Further, an individual's personal mythology is continually evolving. It is a map that needs to be constantly updated because the terrain changes regularly. When people take a new job, reach a new stage of adult development, or lose a family member, the resulting personal turmoil requires that the guiding mythology be updated. A man whose rebelliousness kept his spirit alive amid childhood oppression may become trapped in frivolous power struggles as an adult, without the requisite self-awareness.

### **Re-Visioning Personal Mythology**

To the person who lives within a mythic reality, one's personal mythology is nearly invisible. But like a tourist exploring a foreign land, a coach may perceive elements of the client's myths that merit curiosity. While a myth gives a sense of identity, continuity, and security, it also creates blind spots, inflexibility, and limits one to a narrow perspective. A myth encourages people to hold on to what has worked for them in the past and repeat the formulas or acts of the good old days (Keen & Valley-Fox, 1989).

When the personal myth no longer empowers, nothing is more necessary than the rebirth of the self. By re-authoring the myth, people can infuse new energy into the purpose, perceptions, and possibilities of their lives. New opportunities open up by reframing the story, exploring the metaphors of conflict and reconciliation, and discovering personal resources and strengths that serve as inner allies and sources of power. Like Captain Jean Luc Picard of *Star Trek*, one can discover new frontiers and write new myths.

### **Media Stories: Developing "Self" as Actor, Agent, and Author**

#### **How Media Stories Influence Personal Identity**

How do people know who they are? How do they define themselves? How much agency do they have in constructing their identity?

Research shows that family stories, as well as stories encountered in the media, impact one's development of identity through adulthood - as research subjects are able to recall characters, plots, and themes from media stories, and then elaborate on how they influenced their sense of self.

McAdams et al. (2017) researched the role of media (defined as books, movies, TV shows, plays, songs, social networking sites) stories in informing expectations and

interpretations of reality and found support for the assumption that cultural stories encountered through the media provide raw material for the development of the self. The authors found congruence between personally salient media stories and reported life themes operating at the level of traits, values, identity, and the cultural concept of personal biography. However, as the data for the studies had already been collected earlier and while one can reasonably argue that books and movies pertaining to more salient life periods (e.g., adolescence and emerging adulthood) were influential in the formation of the respondents' identity, it is difficult to conclusively assert that media continues to inform our identity over time.

Nevertheless, the studies showed that media stories were salient because they informed and reflected the subjects' present understanding and future versions of their self, and also provided connections to their past selves. The research found themes that fit with the McAdams et al.'s (2013) framework of the self as actor, agent, and author. In exploring the *actor self*, media stories allow people to "try on" different selves and learn about the kind of person they want to be. The study participants' descriptions focused on the present and the kinds of traits, skills, and social roles associated with the actor self. But the influence of media stories extended beyond the present-focused actor self and emphasized the future (*agent self*), along with social and emotional learning about, and developing, personal values. Media stories were also seen as informing the participants' understanding of the next steps in the plot of their life story, communicating the path their life story is expected to take and influencing how people should be going through their lives at different stages (*author self*).

McAdams et al.'s research further suggests that while there may be individual differences in meaning-making, media stories contribute to a sense of collective identity, critical consciousness, and an overall life philosophy.

### **Re-Authoring Media Stories**

People don't simply function as passive consumers of stories. Even though interactive stories are only recently making their way into popular media, by the time people reach adulthood they have gotten sufficient practice at re-authoring stories, starting from the time they were children. Bettelheim (1976) offers many examples of his observation that both children as well as storytelling adults will distort a fairy tale so they can adapt it to their needs and expectations. Fairy tales are seen as expressions of the inner world of human beings as they offer "examples of both temporary and permanent solutions to pressing difficulties" (p. 6). Bettelheim is aware of the possibility of conscious, deliberate modifications in the plot of fairy tales to suit the needs of a child. He quotes Goethe's mother recounting how she told fairy tales to her son:

"Occasionally, he interfered by saying: 'Mother, the princess will not marry the miserable tailor, even if he slays the giant,' at which I stopped and postponed the catastrophe until the next evening. So, my imagination often was replaced by his and when the following day I arranged the fate according to his suggestions and said 'You guessed it, that's how it came out,' he was all excited and I could see his heart beating." (Watzlawick, 1993, p. 57)

By extension, stories don't have to be factually correct in order to be of use. Often they can disclose not what happened but what people believe or want to believe actually happened (or should happen).

Similar to the approach in coaching, a new story or myth progresses from imagination to intention and then finally action, whereby the inner transformation can be demonstrated in the external world. The butterfly emerges from the chrysalis and both is and is not a new being. Narrative Coaching is a suitable vehicle to realize this personal transformation.

### **Narrative Coaching**

Narrative Coaching is a relatively new field in coaching, although Narrative Therapy, on which it is modeled, has existed for a few decades. Drake wrote *Narrative Coaching* in 2017, which was the first available book in the field and lays out a conceptual foundation for the field, grounding it in attachment theory, social constructivism, anthropology, and mythology.

The primary focus in Narrative Coaching is to work with stories as they emerge from clients in conversations as vehicles for greater awareness, authorship, agility, and accountability. The approach draws primarily on three bodies of work (Wildflower & Brennan, 2011):

1. Narrative Psychology, which focuses on understanding and connecting with the client as narrator (e.g., Gergen's work on social construction of identity)
2. Narrative structure, which focuses on understanding the material in the stories (e.g., Burke on story grammars, Campbell on *The Hero's Journey*)
3. Narrative skills, which focuses on working with the dynamics in the conversational *field* (e.g., Clandinin's three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, White's work on narrative therapy,).

As noted by Drake (2018),

Narrative Coaching is designed to help people externalize their tacit connections and schemas, deconstruct them in slow motion, and reconstruct new neural pathways. This enables them to reframe their memories of the past, have new experiences in the present, and express themselves in new ways in the future. (p. 45)

The coaching model proposed by Drake is acknowledged as a “rites of passage” model, based on the work of Campbell, notably *The Hero’s Journey*.

### **Working With the Monomyth – The Hero’s Journey**

Campbell, an anthropologist, studied the narratives that have defined cultures across the ages and identified elements common to all of them. His remarkable study of the archetypal pattern of the hero’s adventure, illuminated with examples from world mythology and interpreted using the theories of Freud and Jung, resonated with a wide range of people, inspiring the storyteller and filmmaker as much as the psychotherapist and spiritual seeker. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) became something of a guidebook for psychological self-exploration in the 1960s. Campbell was primarily concerned not with the academic study of mythology for its own sake but with helping people find orientation and meaning for their own life paths, both through individuation and through a deep engagement with the creative process (Grice, 2013).

Campbell’s resulting construct, *The Hero’s Journey*, represents the grand story that humanity keeps telling and living over and over. It underpins the world’s great narratives from religions to myths and legends that have defined civilizations. It is also an intimate story of the journey that each of us takes through life as we strive to become self-actualized beings (Hutchens, 2015).



In The Hero's Journey, the protagonist gets a call to action that disrupts their everyday life; having finally accepted that call, the hero crosses the threshold to take action. In the process, the hero benefits from mentors and resources that enable the person to face their fears, slay the dragon, and return home successful. That mirrors the arc of the personal transformation journey. The mentor (or coach) guides the hero in navigating challenges. The mentor—real or imaginary—possesses the qualities the hero needs on the journey and in the ultimate fight with the dragon or (inner) demon. The parallels in coaching include learning from the examples of successful people who inspire us. An archetype, the mythic character at the heart of a person's life story (McAdams, 1993), can serve in the transformative journey by providing a lived template and image of what the character would do in such a situation. That combination of ethos, logos, and pathos—an explicit and motivational future myth—can thus guide the client's behavior and goal-oriented actions.

Steinhouse (2011) describes the use of The Hero's Journey as a coaching intervention for leadership development, acknowledging that the construct is a powerful tool at the level of identity for clients who feel at a deep personal level that a new (or existing) role "is not really me." He describes an executive coaching engagement in which the client, Paul, had issues with his sense of self. "I just don't feel I'm the boss." These words state a belief about Paul's sense of self, and such issues often come up when people are asked to step up to their next development level as organizational leaders or entrepreneurs. Steinhouse noted that these beliefs cannot be tackled with traditional belief change methods (e.g., Cognitive Behavioral Coaching in which one challenges existing beliefs against factual reality) because the individual is entering new territory. These

people lead their lives according to a *script* or “hidden narrative”; As identity is expressed as a role in a story, to change that script an intervention is needed to change the client’s role in that personal story.

Every client comes up with their own list of needed resources/qualities, which, however, are typically some variant of: (1) strength, (2) compassion, and (3) intelligence. These three qualities also map to the Jungian archetypes of Warrior, Lover, and Magician, as well as relates to the classical story of *The Wizard of Oz* in which the lion lacks courage, the tin man lacks a heart, and the scarecrow lacks intelligence.

Once the client reports a felt change to their identity, this evokes a significant change of script (a tenet of Transaction Analysis, founded by Eric Berne) and a more resourceful grown-up self can emerge. As Swede (1977) quotes Berne: They can “really close the old show and put a whole new show on the road” (p. 4). But the key to transformation lies in the clients discovering within themselves the qualities needed to meet the new challenges. Myths, fairy tales, and legends can serve as an inspiration in evoking those qualities.

What accounts for the attraction of mythologies, Greek dramas, or folk tales? Those who believe in deep structure assert that those traditional plots rely on archetypes that capture the essence of the human psyche and destiny.

### **Archetypes**

*“Mythological symbols touch and exhilarate centers of life beyond the reach of the vocabularies of reason and coercion.”* – Joseph Campbell (1991, p. 4)

Archetypes are common patterns containing hidden images of all human motivations and inspirations. They are concealed in the collective unconscious domain of reality and are shared by all humans. They are the substance that myths and symbols are constructed of; because of their universality, they have the capacity to turn individuals into a group and be seen as underpinning culture and society (Kostera, 2008).

Archetypes are as basic as, and very similar to, instincts. Jung noticed that certain themes and symbols (*archetypes*) are universal as they keep appearing in his patients' dreams and in the legends, fairy tales, mythology, religions, and historical reality of every culture since the earliest times. "They are power centers that are hard wired into the psyche of every human being, whether male or female, that largely control or at least provide channels for our thought, speech, and behavior" (Tallman, 2003, p. 19).

Jung believed archetypes serve as links between collective knowledge and individual experience; they are important for building and maintaining a shared understanding of disparate aspects of life (including leadership). According to Jung, all the important ideas, in both science and religion, occur in archetypes. People acquire archetypal images and notions and consciously convert them to ideas, art, technology, and other products of culture and civilization. Archetypes also play a crucial role in the development of the individual. People realize themselves in the individuation process (i.e., in the process of becoming a distinct individual of actualizing what one is) (Jung, 1981).

Typical archetypes connected with individuation are the archetypes of transformation, such as birth, death, and rebirth. Connected to the archetypes of transformation are the personality archetypes (e.g., the Shadow, the Anima and the

Animus, and the Self). There are also personified archetypes referring to characters that can overlap and include family archetypes such as Mother or Father; the archetypes connected with stories such as Adventurer, Sage, or Magician; or animal archetypes such as Lion, Dog, or Wolf (Jung, 1981).

Archetypes mobilize one's imagination and allow people to cross the limits of what is considered possible or reasonable. "Archetypes are like riverbeds, ready to embrace a vast variety of images, ideas, and stories. They can be applied to any organization: family, group, small/large business, military, church, etc." (Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2008). Archetypes are the opposite of stereotypes. In contrast to stereotypes, archetypes awake consciousness and engage deep feelings in the process of experiencing; they are connected with making difficult decisions. Archetypes contain great power and are a source of action and deep motivation (Kostera, 2012).

### **Archetypes in Organizations**

The hero is the archetype of all myths: "The hero's main feat is to overcome the monster of darkness; it is the long-hoped-for and expected triumph of consciousness over the unconscious" (Jung, 1981, para. 284). The hero acts as a symbol for the three ideals of achievement, striving, and triumph, which allow being admitted to Olympus.

Ultimately, the hero enacts the ancient dream of good triumphing over evil.

Heroic narratives about ambition, learning, achievement, and charisma are possibly the best mythological dream for personal, professional, and corporate success. Heroic achievement often starts with a motivating vision or dream. Bargh et al. (2001) concluded that "using achievement as a prime activates not only related concepts such as

success, effort, pride, and so on, but also the intention to do well, to find solutions to problems, and to overcome obstacles” (p. 20).

Moxnes (2013) extends the benefit of using archetypes from the individual to the organization by arguing that while archetypes pertain to emotional reactions and ideation, their effects are felt in terms of corporate operating profits. “Banks scoring high on the index dealing with ‘ambition, learning, and achieving’ (hero archetype traits) were significantly associated with the best financial performance” (p. 644).

A leadership archetype characterizes the way in which leaders deal with people and situations in an organizational context. According to Kets de Vries (2006), healthy archetypes provide an ideal standard by which leaders may measure and model themselves. Contemporary leaders such as Branson and historical figures such as Alexander the Great are relevant to leaders in the archetypal sense from whom they can learn (i.e., not as role models but as characters dealing with many of the vital issues business leaders have to manage today). These effects include the positive aspects of the leader’s personality, activity, and capacity to inspire loyalty and respect, but also the difficulties of maintaining boundaries between one’s own success and that of the organization and the temptation to believe or present oneself in superhuman terms.

Building on the Jungian view of archetypes as power centers that are hardwired into the psyche of every human being, Tallman (2003) suggested using archetypes as a way for leaders to enlighten and empower themselves and for followers to understand leader behavior. Tallman focused on four male archetypes—the King, Warrior, Magician, and Lover—and explained that archetypes also have their dark shadow sides, which are characterized by either total possession or total dispossession by the archetype. (King:

Tyrant/Weakling; Warrior: Sadist or Terrorist/Masochist or Victim; Magician: Manipulator/Innocent; Lover: Addict/Impotent). He suggested that healthy archetypes provide an ideal standard by which leaders may measure themselves whereas Shadow archetypes warn of pitfalls to avoid.

In identifying how business leaders can benefit from archetypes, Tallman (2003) postulated that a healthy leader not only manifests all the archetypes in their positive form; he also keeps an appropriate balance between male archetypes such as the King, Warrior, Magician, and Lover so that they complement and fulfill each other. He further suggests ways of activating and balancing the healthy archetypes and being aware of and avoiding their shadow forms including these examples: (1) *active imaginative dialogue* with the archetypes (i.e., talking to or at least being sensitive to the Warrior, Lover within you); (2) admiration of men exemplifying the positive archetypes (i.e., reading their autobiographies, biographies, keeping their pictures on your desk) to ponder how they would handle difficult situations; and (3) *acting as if* you are already living out of the positive male archetype.

Gherardi (1995) complements Tallman's limited focus on male leaders by showing how female managers tend to be inspired by Greek goddesses in their leadership styles. The most popular role models are either the virgin goddesses (Artemis, Athena, and Hestia) or the vulnerable goddesses (Hera, Demeter, and Perspehone). Such a construction of their role enables them to use the links between power and gender to their advantage (e.g., Athena embodies a consciousness of pragmatism and rationality).

Heroes and villains are often two sides of the same coin as the archetypes they are based on are bipolar. Bowles (1997) points out that

The negative expression of the hero archetype manifests where the hero acts in a self-interested egotistic way where only narrower or particular interests or goals are served, perhaps to the detriment of the community at large. In idealizing the hero and projecting their own hero archetype onto the leader, which can make the leader appear larger than life, others can miss the fact that their own interests are perhaps not only not served, but in fact undermined. (p. 796)

Bowles (1997) further goes on to caution that organizations, on the whole, are often dominated by mythical characters linked to power and manipulation and fail to meet important human needs as the dominant archetypes don't represent the vast spectrum of human feelings and values.

Building from Mintzberg's 10 essential executive roles (figurehead, liaison, leader, monitor, disseminator, spokesman, entrepreneur, disturbance handler, resource allocator, and negotiator), Kets de Vries (2006) asserted certain recurring behavior patterns are considered more or less effective in a leadership context. A leadership archetype characterizes the way in which leaders deal with people and situations within organizations. He postulates that a lack of fit between a set of leadership archetypes and the organizational context in which the executives operate is a main cause of dysfunction and executive failure. The executive should ask themselves what qualities of leadership are required for future success. The identification of the leadership archetypes may be the first step in expanding one's behavioral repertoire. The eight leadership archetypes Kets de Vries identified are strategist, change-catalyst, transactor, builder, innovator, processor, coach, and communicator.

Another use of archetypes in organizational literature is to shed light on organizational virtues and vices, exceptional abilities, attributes, and skills. In addition, archetypes in organization studies inspire, motivate, and enliven the imagination. Managers responsible for strategy can resort to the archetypes of struggle and competition to enhance motivation and engage subordinates in the processes of change.

### **The Benefits of Choosing Archetypes**

#### **Choosing Archetypes to Change: Bridging the Conscious and the Unconscious**

*“When the voices that come in visions and dreams are welcomed, a new harmony sounds between the conscious and the unconscious.”* – Chuang Tzu (as cited in Keen & Valley-Fox, 1989)

Nelson (2007) combines Hindu and Buddhist philosophy on spiritual maturity with the Jungian view on psychological maturity to delineate how archetypal work can spur the development of wisdom. Nelson leverages the definition of an archetype as an energy pattern that is used by the ego as a blueprint of the personality that defines the individual’s *way of being* in the world—a generic prototype that includes a recognizable collection of character traits (Von Franz, 1996). The ego creates an apparently stable reality that allows people to integrate and make sense of external and internal perceptions. Over time, the ego can regulate more and more, strengthening the unconscious-conscious barrier (e.g., a negative incident in childhood or information that is too intense to process). According to Nelson’s Spacious Mind Model (2007), a person can use an archetype as a means of creating an opening into the unconscious mind, outside of ego control, to allow mind stuff to be released and thus create an empty mind. The archetypal energy pattern acts as a safe aperture between the conscious and



unconscious mind to release the emotional material that has been stuffed and sealed (Houston, 1996).

A person can choose to work consciously with an archetype for both psychological and spiritual development. Ways of working with archetypes include finding stories, holding the archetypal image in the mind, finding and releasing emotions that the archetype evokes in the body, and drawing the archetype or moving the archetype in dance. Per Nelson (2007), the simplest way to begin is to find a picture and a story about the archetype.

Using archetypes to create an opening between the conscious and unconscious minds can have many benefits. The unconscious stores long-term memories, habits, behaviors, and deeply held emotions. One can tap into one's greater personal capacity by using this reserve of life experiences to guide future behavior. A bridge between the conscious and unconscious minds is also helpful to one's creativity. Einstein is perhaps the most famous person to speak to the benefits of the unconscious mind informing the conscious as he spoke openly about getting inspiration from visualization, daydreaming, and playing the violin while working on the Theory of Relativity.

Myths (and archetypes) are fundamental to language and storytelling and thus function as the foundation of culture both in society and in organizations. A myth is not always good or leads to a fulfilling life for its creators and/or supporters. There are constructive and destructive myths, myths that connect and myths that demonize the other, myths promoting empathy and equity, and myths that generate fear and egotism. The use of myths does not guarantee a better society or organization, neither a better culture nor more effective communication. But being attentive to the mythical side of

organizations can bring a greater awareness and insights because an organizational myth bears consequences for the individual and the collective (teams, departments, and the broader corporation). Thus, myths can also serve as a managerial tool or a tool to manage one's social and organizational role.

### **Choose Archetypes Consciously to Manage Social Identity**

*“People classified in a certain way tend to conform to or grow into the ways that they are described.”* – Pygmalion Effect (as cited in Moxnes & Moxnes, 2016, p. 1534).

Alternatively, one could take a different (outside-in) perspective and look at an individual within an organizational system and a web of interpersonal/group relationships. Leaders, in particular, occupy symbolic roles and actions made, both by and toward leaders, are likely to involve archetypal imagery (Kets de Vries, 1994). Studies have shown that American presidents who were rated as the greatest were those who engaged in archetype-based rhetoric in their speeches, whether from Biblical imagery or folk tales (Emrich et al., 2001).

It seems reasonable to consider that symbols of fairy tales and other mythological stories reveal aspects of organizational culture (Moxnes, 2013). For example, Abraham's myth is one of the earliest examples of leader-follower behavior in the Western civilization (Abramson, 2007). Common mythological and religious themes show a close correspondence with the assumptions maintained by work groups. For example, Bion's (1961) three basic assumptions in work groups—Dependency, Fight-Flight, and Pairing—can be seen as arising from archetypal affects. Dependency is manifest in many mythologies (e.g., deferring to an omnipotent leader). The Fight-Flight theme is often reflected in myths as the young prince who ventures into the world to slay the dragon

whereas Pairing reflects the happily-ever-after theme of myths in which romantic couples are joined together with the hope of eternal happiness and a new life (Moxnes, 2013).

Since leaders occupy mythological roles, they become the repository for collective fantasies (or nightmares!) of employees. Organizational life fosters archetypal imagery under turbulence, conflict, and stress. There are certain emotionally charged, inborn, or early life acquired role images that we are not conscious of; yet they might have an enormous impact on us. Researchers such as Moxnes and Moxnes (2016) suggest that group members automatically and unconsciously categorize fellow members into stereotypes (*Deep Roles*) that have their roots in archetypal imagination. These roles provide order to social interactions and give purpose and direction to organizational life. Those attributed as a Deep Role have similar symbolic power as the characters in mythology and fairy tales (Moxnes & Moxnes, 1999). Therefore, when a leader's behavior evokes an archetypal role image, powerful emotions and expectations can transform the leader-follower or intra-group relationships.

In a multiyear study involving 1,333 participants in 31 leadership development classes, Moxnes and Moxnes (2016) studied whether or not members attributed archetypal roles upon group members and whether or not the same role was associated with the same person. Results showed that individuals *were* assigned a specific role by a large number of participants when participants categorized fellow class members into seven good (God/King, Queen, Crown Prince, Princess, Wiseman, Slave/Servant, and Winner/Hero) and seven bad (Devil, Witch, Black Sheep, Whore, False Prophet, Disloyal Servant, and Loser/Clown) fairy tale roles (Deep Roles) with a magnitude of agreement that suggests that the role attribution wasn't random.

The study suggests that archetypal roles based on myths and fairy tales have implications for organizational and group life as well as in coaching. Group members unconsciously attribute roles to others based on Jungian archetypes; leaders and co-workers must recognize and manage this phenomenon lest they conform to or grow into the way they are described by others. *Social identity* is how a person is known by the people around them. Everyone has a reputation that determines the way people interact with them. Given the nature of social identity in which people begin to interact with someone in line with that person's reputation, the person is also likely to respond in anticipated ways or get pushback (surprise, assessments) and negative reinforcement from the social environment. Rather than being sucked into a role based on others' expectations and unconscious projections, it may be helpful to proactively and consciously select an archetypal character image based on a new/updated (future) personal myth. This re-visioned personal myth cannot only facilitate goal-oriented behavior but also transform one's perceptions and relationships within the system, which, in turn, reinforces the social construction of one's professional or leadership identity.

### **Conclusion**

Coaches work with clients to help them discover and refine the ways in which they make meaning from their life experiences. The stories clients tell are a window into their reality and identity—a process McAdams (1993) calls “uncovering their personal myth,” which he describes as follows:

I ask people to tell me the stories of their lives because I believe their verbal accounts hold the outlines of internalized personal myths....An individual does not suddenly invent a personal myth in the course of the interview. The myth is

there all along, inside the mind. It is a psychological structure that evolves slowly over time, infusing life with unity and purpose. An interview can elicit aspects of that myth, offering me hints concerning the truth already in place in the mind of the teller. (1993, p. 20).

Ricoeur (1985) makes this relevant insight:

It is in telling our own stories that we give ourselves an identity. We recognize ourselves in the stories we tell about ourselves, it makes little difference whether these stories are true or false, fiction as well as verifiable history provides us with a sense of identity (as cited in Venema, 2000, p. 117).

This literature review uncovers not only the role of personal myths in constructing personal reality but also how myths offer *lived meaning* by providing one's identity, direction, and purpose in life. As the building blocks of myths and common patterns containing hidden images of all human motivation and inspiration, archetypes can mobilize the imagination and be a source of creativity and action for organizational leaders. After asking clients to consciously assess if their personal myth is still serving their personal and professional aspirations, coaches may help clients re-author their personal myth using inspiration from archetypes that abound in myths, fairy tales, or media stories. In fact, given the dynamics of group life, it may be helpful to consciously and powerfully evoke an organizational archetype as opposed to being attributed one by members of the group/organization that unconsciously assign Deep Roles (based on archetypes) to group members, thereby transforming the leader-follower or intra-group relationships.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the research design, sample selection, data collection, data management, and process of analyzing data for the capstone.

#### Research Design

The underlying philosophy guiding the research was Interpretive/Constructive: There is no single, observable reality but rather multiple realities, or interpretations, of a single event. These subjective meanings are formed through interactions with others (*social constructivism*) and through historical and cultural norms that operate in people's lives.

The primary goals for the research were to understand how executive coaches: (a) use stories to uncover or understand the personal myth or central story of their clients and (b) work with clients to re-author or re-vision their personal myth. A qualitative research design was best suited for this purpose as the data resulting from a qualitative descriptive study are descriptions in the participants' own words about their experience (Maxwell, 2013) and are rich with examples and participants' concerns at the forefront (Leavy, 2017). Qualitative research recognizes that data are gathered in a context and seeks to understand and interpret local meanings, yielding detailed and complex accounts from each study participant. Further, while qualitative research seeks patterns, a key strength is accommodating and exploring differences and divergence within data (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Accordingly, I used qualitative research to understand the process of meaning-making by executive coaches. A qualitative approach also supported my intent to be

inductive and let the data determine the insights and generalizations as opposed to testing or validating an existing hypothesis or theory. Additionally, as the primary instrument of research design, I could be responsive and adaptive in expanding the participants' understanding through verbal and nonverbal communication (including pauses, laughter, tone, and emphasis) and exploring unusual or unanticipated responses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### **The Sample**

I deployed nonprobabilistic, purposeful sampling of executive coaches for this study in reaching out to the following sampling pools to solicit study participants:

- University of Pennsylvania Organizational Dynamics (DYNM) faculty
- Graduate School Alliance for Education in Coaching (GSAEC) faculty recommended by University of Pennsylvania DYNM faculty
- Narrative Coaching practitioners (including those who explicitly focus on client narrative in the coaching model in which they received certification)
- Coaches within the International Coaching Federation (ICF) network personally known to me as a result of attending different coaching certifications.

For practical considerations, I started with a convenience sample recommended by faculty at the University of Pennsylvania DYNM program, having knowledge of and access to coach practitioners at the University of Pennsylvania, and other university coaching programs. Subsequently, I contacted qualified executive coaches in my own network and then deployed snowball sampling in asking those interviewed to suggest additional qualified narrative coaches.

Eventually, I interviewed 10 qualified participants. Qualified coaches were defined to include executive coaches who met ONE of the following criteria:

1. Have taught in a college or university coaching program included the GSAEC.
2. Are credentialed by the ICF at any level of certification (Associate Certified Coach [ACC], Professional Certified Coach [PCC], Master Certified Coach [MCC]) and have at least 10 years of coaching experience.
3. Are certified by a coaching school approved by the ICF (list of schools available on the ICF website) and have at least 10 years of coaching experience.

The third criterion was included because the field of coaching has executive coaches who may not care about credentialing (given their professional and coaching track record) but still attend a formal coaching program to learn new models or for personal development.

To understand any differences in the use of storytelling within organizational coaching contexts, I also interviewed external coaches (those who have their own coaching practice) who had previously served as internal coaches. These individuals were included to balance the need for incorporating diverse (including internal) perspectives with the rigor brought by external coaches who tend to have more comprehensive training than internal coaches.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection for the study took place between September 2019 and February 2020. With a view to both building rapport with the interviewees and allowing them the freedom to flesh out and interpret their responses as they deemed fit, I conducted semistructured and open-ended interviews so I could include follow-up and probing



questions to clarify and expand the participants' response. The questions were both descriptive and interpretive, covering behavior, attitude, knowledge, and feelings (Patton, 2015).

I used an interview guide to facilitate data collection. Given the semistructured nature of the interview, the questions progressed from the general (how the coaches listen to and offer stories within executive coaching) to the specific (how they help the client re-author their story) but allowed sufficient flexibility for interviewees to take the conversation in different directions (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). I used a *pilot interview*<sup>4</sup> with a DYNM faculty member to try out the interview questions and then, based on learnings, refined the interview guide to keep the questions easily understood and jargon-free.

The interviews were mostly conducted online using Zoom video teleconferencing, or in person, and recorded<sup>5</sup>. They were transcribed using speech-to-text capability of Otter and then edited comprehensively for quality control—by confirming each word—to ensure data accuracy. The transcription greatly aided pattern recognition during the data coding and analyses phases.

Given the use of videoconferencing, I did not limit the geographic location of the interviewees. While most of the coaches interviewed reside in the United States, the inclusion of coaches with a global perspective enriched this study as some cultures have a more pronounced tradition of storytelling. However, I did not do any email or written interviews.

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<sup>4</sup> Not included in the research data and analysis.

<sup>5</sup> I was unable to record one interview that was conducted via phone, not Zoom, so took extensive notes that were immediately typed up once the interview was over.

I have extensive experience in interviewing individuals, having conducted internal and external client research during my 20-year professional career in financial services and consulting. Given my own executive coaching practice, I am familiar with both Narrative Coaching and the coaching process, allowing me to further probe and expand upon interviewee responses.

### **Interviews**

The interviews averaged 55 minutes, ranging from 45 to 75 minutes. I introduced myself and the purpose of my research and made the participant aware that I was recording the interview. In some cases the coach inquired further into my background and that of the research. In other cases, the introductory email inviting them to the interview provided sufficient background.

I used an outline of the interview guide questions to get me started and to generally keep me on track in obtaining data to address my research question. Given the semistructured nature of the interview process, I did not strictly adhere to a specific sequence in which the questions were asked.

- How do you use stories in your coaching engagements?
  - Do you ask for them?
  - Do they organically come up?
  - Do you offer stories to clients?
- Could you describe a recent situation where a client shared a story with you?
- Do you find stories useful? If so, how do they help your coaching?
- What do you listen for in a story?

- Do you, at any stage, try to figure out a central story the client is living? How is that useful to you (or otherwise)? Could you give an example?
- Having assessed a client's central story, do you help the client craft a new central story? If so, how do you do that? (Probe: process of client re-authoring story).
- Do you invite clients to re-author their story using a role model (or archetype)? (Follow-up to understand coach rationale either way).
- How can a new story help the client? How do you assess whether a new story was helpful to the client?

### **Data Management**

Data management includes the systems and process of data collection, how it is stored, and how the researcher retrieves the data (Silverman, 2013). Appropriate data management enables accessibility and retention of data after the study is completed.

For this study, I transcribed the recorded interviews using Otter technology. The transcribed recordings are available on the cloud software platform. I did not use computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) software to analyze the data. Instead, I coded the transcribed recordings using the *Insert Comment* feature on MS Word. Then, I copied and pasted these comments in an Excel file, which allowed me to collate, filter, and refine codes. My computer thus acts as an electronic file cabinet storing the recordings, transcriptions, coding logs, electronic files, and emails to and from the participants in the study. The data are also backed up on the cloud drive (Microsoft's OneDrive).

## Data Analysis

I chose an inductive approach in my research so that the data actually drive the analysis and allow for the ability to give voice to the experiences and meanings of the interviewees (Braun & Clarke, 2012). At the guidance of my capstone advisor, I used Thematic Analysis (TA) as a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The two reasons I chose Thematic Analysis were accessibility and flexibility. As someone new to qualitative research, I did not need to become aware of complex theoretical perspectives on language before learning the mechanics of coding and analyzing data systematically, and then linking it to the broader research objectives. The flexibility to both report the semantic, or obvious, meaning and interrogate the latent meaning, assumptions, and ideas behind the data was another cogent argument in favor of Thematic Analysis.

I adhered to the six phases in Thematic Analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006):

1. Familiarize yourself with the data: reading and re-reading textual data and making notes.
2. Generating initial codes: identifying and labeling a feature of data relevant to my research questions, including my interpretive comments on data.
3. Searching for themes: reviewing coded data to identify some unifying feature or meaning within the data set.

4. Reviewing potential themes: quality checking themes against data to explore whether the theme works or, alternatively, redraw the boundaries of the theme.
5. Defining and naming themes: clearly stating what is unique and specific about each theme.
6. Writing the analysis: connecting themes logically to tell a coherent story about the data.

I paid close attention to metaphors, analogies, and linguistic connectors suggesting relationships (attributes, functions, examples, and comparisons) to deduce the underlying themes that might produce those metaphors and connectors (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

Once the data analysis was complete, I wrote the narrative account of the study, which is presented in Chapter 4.

## CHAPTER 4

### DATA INTERPRETATION

The purpose of my research was to study how executive coaches use stories in their coaching engagements. In particular, I wanted to conduct research on how executive coaches use stories to understand the personal myth (or central story) of the client, and how and to what extent these executive coaches help their clients re-vision their personal myth in line with the goals and expectations from the coaching engagement.

In effect, this study meant examining both how executive coaches discern the existing personal myth the client is living and the process by which they co-create or help the coachee re-vision that personal myth in service of the client's goals.

The research brought forward an array of factors that on the surface work against inviting a client to a new narrative. Indeed, some coaches resisted the idea of discerning a central client story in the first place, using the rationale that searching for a story would inevitably lead to confirmation bias and impact relationship development with the client should the client suspect the executive coach was searching for (or confirming) a theme or pattern in the client's life. Other reservations stemmed from their belief that many stories are playing simultaneously in the client's life so for reasons of practicality it made little sense to search for them, even if the coaches were willing to reflect back any pattern they had discerned in the client's behavior.

Further, there was much greater resistance to the concept of inviting or offering a client a new narrative. Some coaches felt that this approach would make the process a lot more contrived and laborious. Others chafed at the assumption of power inherent in such an act. Still others believed that in striving to help their clients be their best selves,

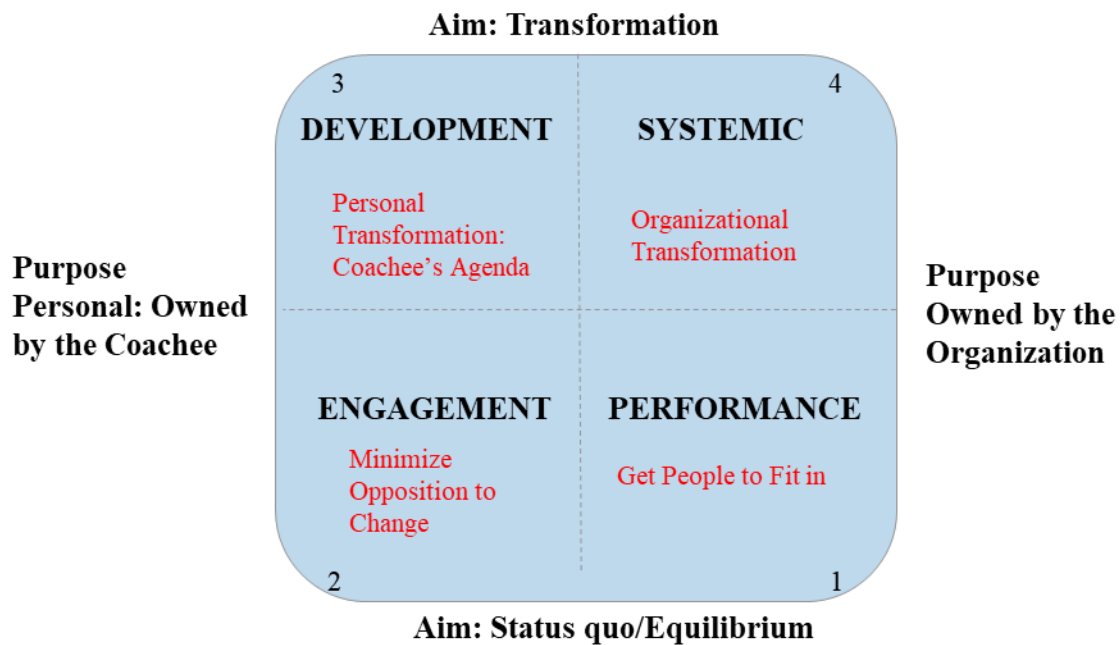
sharing examples, role models, or archetypes, they would instead end up constraining the client rather than encouraging them to be more expansive. Clients don't want to copy anyone; instead, they want to realize their own potential.

However, if one peels the layers of the onion to examine the client's developmental journey, one would find elements of a process where, at different stages of the client engagement, the executive coach helps the client rewrite and transform a personal narrative. My intent in drawing the linkages is to highlight that coaches can invite clients to re-author their personal myth, even drawing on role models and/or archetypes, in a way consistent with the basic tenet in coaching: Assume the client is resourceful and the expert on the client's life (Rogers, 1961).

The findings of my research show that logical progression—from discerning a central theme or story to re-visioning that myth—in terms of the coaching process followed during a typical multimonth executive coaching engagement. My research has explicitly taken the frame of *Developmental Coaching* in which the work is holistic: Both one's work and one's private life are explicitly on the agenda. The assumption is that people are resourceful so it's useful to take an explicit look at *the power horizon*—namely, how decisions are actually made as well as the things that are Taken-for-Granted (Rogers, 2016). This approach (2016, “Situational Coaching” section) is based on Brockbank and McGill's (2013) framework on Situational coaching, captured in the matrix below:

Figure 1

## Situational Coaching



The essence of the process is presented below in terms of the key themes of my research<sup>6</sup>:

### **Asking for a Story Sparks Change**

Across the board, all study participants spoke to the usefulness of client stories in executive coaching. While some highly experienced coaching practitioners acknowledged that the process of reflecting on how they used stories had made them more appreciative of the extent to which stories enhance the coaching process, a key theme in the research was consciously inviting a story—as opposed to letting them organically arise in a conversation—to begin the process of desired change.

<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise noted as sourced from literature and listed under References, all quotes represent remarks from study participants. No identifiers have been used to ensure requested confidentiality.



There is some expectation...that you have changed behavior just by exploring the story....I'm not assigning the language, I'm helping the client explore it....I would say that behavior is changed (as a result). And the next time he (client, CEO) talks with her (functional head), it will likely lead to him being able now to be more clear about making his point, as opposed to her just thinking he doesn't like her....And then who knows what could happen from there because now they had a more clear exchange about what's actually going on. Maybe something's now different about their relationship....So yeah, asking for a story definitely drives change.

### **Stories as a Learning Device**

Stories are a great device for learning because they put the listener in a mental learning mode by re-creating the emotional state of curiosity we had as children but which, as adults, we tend to lose. In this childlike state, we are more receptive to what we hear (Parkin, 2010). Further, storytelling has aspects that appeal to all kinds of learners: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. Visual learners appreciate the mental pictures storytelling evokes. Auditory learners focus on the words and the voice. Kinesthetic learners remember the emotional connections and feelings from the story (Smith, 2012)

Neuroscience researchers have also discovered that people experiencing the same narrative experience *neural coupling*—the process during which the teller and listeners of stories display similar brain activity (Stephens, Silbert, & Hasson, 2010). This neural coupling explains how storytelling, and that shared experience, can help build bonds of community and even empathy, which is a key attribute of competent coaches.

## **Stories Make Clients Fully Present**

One of the most powerful ways stories contribute to the coaching process is by enabling clients to become fully present to themselves. Many facets of this phenomenon include (a) welcoming all elements of a client's life—personal and professional; (b) getting clients emotionally and somatically engaged, not just cognitively; and (c) leveraging neuroscience in service of the client.

One study participant said: “Stories are a way for clients to share what they might not feel comfortable sharing about themselves otherwise.” Another participant made this comment:

They (clients) tell a story with their expressions and mirror how they hold themselves....We can use stories to get to the heart of things, but sometimes people just need to be able to tell you a story. They need to be able to say what they're angry about, because sometimes you're working with a leader and they don't have anyone else in their life that they can say how angry and hurt they are by what their boss did or with what is going on with them at work. And so, when you're coaching someone in a business leadership role, often they don't have anyone else they can be that open with. They just really need to be able to express themselves, and stories are the vehicle to do that....I find that sometimes you just have to let them go on for a while, because they need that, before you start to really pull the story apart and have them see what you know is going on within the story.

Organizations have historically been places that have encouraged people to show up with a narrow professional self. It's hard for trust to flourish when everyone is hiding

to some extent behind a professional mask; without trust allowing the client to be vulnerable to the coach, there is little the coach can do to benefit the client. Stories allow clients to share details about their whole self and be vulnerable in the process.

In the executive coaching arena, many people are strictly about the business. So you get the 360, you get the assessment, you start to work together and develop an action plan. You discuss that action plan with the stakeholders who invited you in, and the client, and there's very little in that scenario that is personal...You know, as a coach, there are things in the background that can affect how you are as a leader....Stories get you there.

For the coach, it's limiting to see only a narrow facet of the client when the coachee fragments the individual between the personal and professional. There isn't much for the coach to work with if a client only presents a persona that's little more than a professional resume.

So, a story isn't just a recitation of facts...it has a beginning, middle, and it has some kind of an end, even though their story hasn't ended. But, clients can look at the end as this is how I got here, to today. And that's very different from reciting your resume....One of the things I found out early on...at the beginning of my coaching career was if I asked someone, tell me about yourself. I got a recitation of their resume or their CV....It didn't tell me anything. I had to really think about how do I get to know this person? So, it occurred to me....Ok. A narrative. It's how I talk about things.

A number of organizational scholars (e.g., Cook-Greuter, Kegan, Torbert) have looked at leadership from the lens of stages of development, paralleling studies on

development of human consciousness. In his recap of the organizational models that correspond to the stage of human consciousness, Laloux (2014) found *the social mask* as a feature of *Conformist-Amber* organizations<sup>7</sup> that valued size and stability (p. 22).

According to Laloux (2014), “Social stability comes at the price of wearing a mask, of learning to distance ourselves from our unique nature, from our personal desires, needs, and feelings; instead we embrace a socially acceptable self” (p. 22).

Coaching is a unique space in which clients can show up in ways that they ordinarily cannot at work because it’s not socially acceptable within the (e.g., Conformist-AMBER) organization, even though the newer Evolutionary TEAL organizations are appreciated for consciously embracing the whole self at work.

I don’t think that there are many spaces in the world, where we get to be all of ourselves. If we’re fortunate we have we have a partner that allows us to be ourselves, we have good friends where we can....But, in the workplace, you don’t have that. So, I find coaching...a very sacred space. It’s a sacred space where a person can really be who they are with all their emotions, angry and sad and all of these come through in their stories. So, by accepting their story you allow the person to be in their very essence.

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<sup>7</sup> Laloux (2014) has summarized the stages of development in organizational models to correspond with the color scheme in Spiral Dynamics. Given the scale of human history, I’m merely representing these models with a guiding metaphor, in order of their evolution: 1) Impulsive-RED: Wolf pack; (2) Conformist-AMBER: Army; 3) Achievement-ORANGE: Machine; (4) Pluralistic-GREEN: Family; (5) Evolutionary-TEAL: Living system. People operating from all of these paradigms are working side by side today, even if Impulsive-RED organizations exist only at the fringes of legal activity. Conformist-AMBER is heavily present in hierarchical organizations such as government agencies and public schools. Achievement-ORANGE is the dominant paradigm of business corporations. While Pluralistic-GREEN started taking shape in the 1960s with an emphasis on information, empowerment, and diversity, TEAL, the latest model, represents the key features of self-organization, wholeness, and an evolutionary purpose.

Even within the coaching engagement, stories are unique because they allow the client the ability to integrate all parts of themselves. Most organizations have emotional display rules (Hochschild, 1983) that guide employees in terms of which emotions are appropriate in the professional context. Stories help clients both re-experience and make sense of their emotions. Research using functional magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) imaging of the brain shows that labeling feelings helps reduce their intensity and returns some of the activity back to the prefrontal cortex along with more cognitive control (Hammond, 2015). Thus, stories, and reflection on what their emotions signal, help clients improve their self-awareness and self-management; as a result, emotional intelligence can lead to more considered responses to challenging and triggering situations.

This magnificent phrase: “tell me about that.” Or, “tell me more”... Inevitably leads to a story....My job is to facilitate their thinking. Their feelings. Their processing of the situation. Emotional intelligence is a big part of doing that. Just by saying “tell me more”, you help clients relive and recreate that experience, without drawing their attention to what you’re doing (getting them to re-live it and assess what they would do differently).

Experienced coaches know that making space for emotions in a coaching session can facilitate a different level of change, growth, and progress for their clients. Haidt (2006) uses the metaphor of a rider on an elephant to describe choice and change. As per the metaphor, while the rider is rational and can plan ahead, the elephant is irrational and driven by emotion and instinct. At best the rider (logic and willpower) can control the elephant (emotion and motivation) for a short while; eventually, the elephant will have its

way. So if coaches only focus on the rider (the rational, logical part of the client) while ignoring the elephant (the emotions, motivations, and core values of the client), lasting change is unlikely.

Perhaps what is most powerful about stories is that they allow the coach to reflect back to the client their *Shadow* and confront what they deny or are otherwise unable to acknowledge within themselves. Shadow is one of the terms Jung used for a part of the human psyche, which was defined by one of his pupils as “a mythological name for all that within me which I cannot directly know” (Von Franz, 1974, p. 3). Bly took an intense interest in the concept of the human shadow; he believed that any help that could lift him out of his misery would come from the dark side of his personality. Bly defined shadow as “‘the long bag we drag behind us,’ heavy with parts of ourselves our parents or community didn’t approve of” (Bly, 1988, p. 17).

The transformative power in confronting the shadow was raised in my interviews as well with this comment: “We spend a great deal of effort protecting our Shadow. Stories, particularly if they repeat certain elements, or are repeated, force clients to confront their shadows.”

This phenomenon is also acknowledged by Drake (2018) who believes that it is through the integration of their Shadow that clients can make the most of Vygotsky’s zones of proximal development and develop more robust working models of the world, which in line with attachment theory. As our Shadow contains all the elements that make us human but never make their way into our conscious lives, the Shadow represents an untapped reserve of energies that are crucial for the client’s longer term development and future success.

Like one founder said, I cannot figure out for the life of me why my board wants me to get a COO. And, I'm like: Oh, my god, look at your Hogan data, nothing about you suggests that you should be running the operational side of what a COO does. But you SHOULD be the person doing all this great thinking. We live in paradox. We tend to like one side more than the other, and the one side is awesome and is your strength. And then we underplay the dark, you know the shadow, what is actually really important for that person's success.

One of the more intriguing insights of the research was the strategic use of stories by executive coaches to get a real picture of the client and their situation. As clients are "in the story" during the process of narration, they are less able to edit them in real time—particularly when they are also "unaware of all the data in the story" and its inherent potential. Some coaches, therefore, actively ask for stories to work around the highly evolved processing a successful executive does in presenting an image they'd like the world to see about them.

I certainly do encourage people to get into that part of the brain...that's more interesting and creative using storytelling, metaphor, analogies, etc. And I think it's less edited when somebody is being very guarded and trying to stay to the facts, which they're running through the executive prefrontal cortex, and editing from a safety standpoint....So, I try any number of ways to get them out of their prefrontal cortex and get them into a space where it's more interesting for both of us. Because my gift is going to be to be able to use my curiosity. And that (storytelling, metaphor) is how I get there.

Even if the clients are presenting a version of events that presents them in a favorable light, all the elements from the story, including nonverbal signals such as the client's energy, body language, tone, and emphasis, are data to the coach.

I was dealing with a young guy who'd been very successful in the banking industry... and was earning huge money. He came to coaching and said: You know, I've just been offered another job in another country in the same industry. I don't know if I should take it. On the one hand, it's good money, on the other hand it's moving to another country. But he spoke back to me in a monotone. And I said okay let's keep your job aside for a moment. Tell me about other aspects of your life, what do you love? And he said, I love fishing! I love going to the sea and fishing. And then we barbecue the fish with my father and fiancé and we have a fabulous time! And, I said: I just want to tell you what I've just noted, when I asked you about your job, you were contained. But, when I asked you what you liked, and you told me about fishing, you were very animated and enthusiastic. Do you want to tell me about this difference? And he said that's because I love fishing and I don't love my job. Then we started to talk about what needed to be done next as the energy in the story had quickly revealed the crux of the issue.

### **Stories Reveal the Client's Reality**

*"Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one."*— Albert Einstein

Coaches recognize that our reality is socially constructed through our social interactions. Any organizational event, business acquisition, performance review, promotion, or employee termination is perceived and interpreted differently by different



organizational members. It's not events or stimuli that lead to behavior; it's the individual's interpretation of a phenomenon that results in the actions they take.

Stories are a window into how my client views the world, frames an issue, and the current reality. When a client tells me a story, he or she is also telling himself or herself a story. So, I think about how that client thinks, and sometimes the interesting thing is that clients don't always know. They don't notice what they're really saying in their story. So for me they're great springboards to delve into what's going on in the client's awareness.

As human beings, we are wired for story. This has been confirmed by split-brain neuroscience research done by Gazzaniga in which specialized neural circuits were shown to detect order and meaning in the flow of information the brain receives from the environment, and to organize it into a coherent account of a person's experience—in other words, a story (Gottschall, 2012).

Stories reveal the iceberg of our clients' lives. What we see in actions and hear from our clients are just the tip of the iceberg. To achieve the desired results and facilitate sustainable change, coaches need to work with what's invisible (or submerged in the iceberg metaphor) in the clients' lives: values, beliefs, mindsets, assumptions, thinking patterns, and feelings.

One of the most powerful benefits of a story isn't to coaches but to clients. As one of the interviewees said, "Stories allow clients to catch up with themselves," particularly when it comes to transitions as turning points, which tend to be much more obvious in the telling than in the living (Ibarra, 2005).

When people start telling you a story and you're quiet, sometimes what happens is...something sort of bubbles up out of the story. And, (as their coach) you ask: "Wait, let's go back to that thing. What did you say about x?" And there's a place for some work that needs to be done with the client that they are unaware of. Like a client told me: "Before I sit down to talk with you, I think I don't really have anything to talk to her today. And within five minutes, I'm in tears...and, I'm like: oh, I didn't even know that was there!" We just need to have a way of finding that opening. I think stories lead us there.

Stories also allow clients to perceive differently than they did in the moment, as noted by this study participant:

When a client tells me a story, he or she is also telling himself or herself a story. The interesting thing is that clients don't always know. They don't notice what they're really saying in their story....Sometimes while telling you the story, the client will say something like: I can't believe I did that! Or, something like that... it's almost like their subconscious is kind of interjecting into the situation and making observations and connections.

By telling stories, clients can externalize the experience and view it as an observer: Moving from an *I* story to a *Me* story in which *I* stands for the self-as-subject, self-as-knower, and *Me* as the self-as-object, self-as known, in which the subjective self (*I*) who is observing can discern the objective self (*Me*) who is being observed (Drake, 2018). That way, clients are able to see themselves as greater than the story and notice patterns in their story, which they wouldn't otherwise.

Sometimes, the clients are operating at a level of abstraction that they are really lost...they're not being present with themselves in their abstraction. In such a situation I ask them for an example, and inevitably they bring up a story that helps them both get into and explain the situational details and pull themselves out of them by making the connections they weren't earlier.

Research has also shown that reflecting on your life, both past and present, as a third person observer can help you see yourself, and the challenges you're facing or have overcome, more compassionately. Ayduk and Kross (2010) discovered that research participants who were asked to psychologically distance themselves when reflecting on negative memories reported less emotional pain, improved problem solving, and greater life satisfaction; they also gained new insights into those memories while avoiding any sense of being emotionally overwhelmed.

All journeys have a starting point. In the journey of personal transformation undertaken within the coaching assignment, clients can place a flag at the starting point: You Are Here. It doesn't matter where you come from, which direction you're headed in; you're not too late and you're not too early. But you can't know where you're going until you know where you are (Burnett & Evans, 2016).

Stories situate the client within their world and the appropriate system, allowing the examination of broader environmental and cultural forces as they impact them. This effect is in line with the advocacy of a systems perspective to reduce identifying with one element in a system as the root cause of a problem and instead paying attention to the system including the industry, the country, our planet, and also one's family and friends (O'Neill, 2007). Coaches look for these linkages and connections in the client's world.

As one study participant noted, “Sometimes the stories reveal that you need to take a systems perspective. As when you need to change one thing, you may need to change three others as well.”

### **Stories Spotlight Various Client Identities**

Identity is an individual’s sense of self and includes unique physical and psychological characteristics, along with the individual’s social roles and affiliations.

Stories allow coaches to see behind the mask(s) clients wear in public to gain a sense of their identity. It is hard for most people to directly reflect on their identities; it’s much more fruitful to approach them indirectly in coaching through interactions, communications, and actions (Ricoeur, 1992). Drake (2018) asserts that stories are perfect for this purpose as they make the invisible identity processes visible, allowing people to see that they are both authors of, and actors in, their performances.

Stories reflect the various elements of a client’s identity. How do the clients see themselves? Do they have agency and self-efficacy? What do they see as their primary identity? How do they describe themselves while answering: Who am I? What is mine to do? Who are others? These questions reflect the stages of moral development: from *Me* (egocentric) to stage 2 *Us* (ethnocentric), And at stage 3 the identity expands to *All of us* (world-centric) (Gilligan, 2003). As one study participant noted: “Without looking for them directly, conflicting identities can be really helpful in coaching...if you spot them in a story and make that visible to the client.”

Stories also inform a coach on the client’s stage of leadership development, as noted by this study participant:

I think that you can find that (the stage of leadership development) out so that you can help them at the right level by...the scope of their self-knowledge and their predilection for examining themselves. In general, some people are very intelligent, but they are not introspective. They don't spend a lot of time thinking about...their behavior or their thought patterns. Why did I do this? Should I have done that differently? And then you have a sense of what kind of coaching client you have got...what you have to work with in terms of their self-knowledge and self-awareness.

In summation, stories function at multiple levels within coaching. They allow clients the ability to detach from the story to examine and learn what's working for them and what's not. They allow both coaches and clients to understand the client's reality by examining all aspects of a client's life. Stories also serve as personal resources for clients in identifying experiences, skills, and personal strengths that were helpful to them in handling different personal and professional challenges. These insights can serve as the basis for re-discovering or re-constructing resources that can benefit them in their journey of ongoing personal development.

### **Quilting “Big Stories” From “Little Stories”**

#### **Start With Whatever the Client Brings Up**

All the coaches interviewed for the research confirmed that whether they invite stories in a coaching session or whether they come up organically, stories provide insight at multiple levels: What happened? Who all was involved? What role was the client playing? What does the story mean to the client?

I invite the client into whatever story she wants to tell me. It's an open ended invite, to see where she will go with it...but I am interested in the story at multiple levels: to open up the client, to set the client thinking....To have the client get out from the abstract and paint a more vivid picture of who the client is and what the client wants....At the same time, it's a metaphor to get to know the client a bit better. I've used stories to get a sense of what's happening in the client's system...who's the person behind the professional?...what's important to her, and what that story meant to her.

The individual stories are a window into what the client wants, what successes or achievements the client cares about, how the client handles conflict and navigates tricky inter-personal situations, all stories have value that goes beyond the content of the story.

I'm just hearing the content at the time but I'm trying to listen to how did the person feel? What was their self-talk? What was the internal narrative? Like I was stupid or I didn't believe him. So I'm listening to the way they are describing themselves in that moment, how they're describing the other person. The inter-person dynamics. I'm listening to the event but more about how was that person I'm coaching in that space? Were they angry? Were they attacking? Were they accepting? What I'm hearing is what pattern were they doing, and how they were feeling about themselves.

The individual story, or the "little story" ("what happened"), serves as the starting point for the coach's curiosity for seeing clients at a deeper level, embracing their complexity.

I don't care about the content when I ask about the story. I'm interested in seeing where that person's passion and interest lies and how they describe a situation will tell me a lot about what they care about. What did they focus on? What are they highlighting? What seems to be just glossed over in the story?

### **“The Thing Behind the Thing”**

While the coaches eschew searching for a central story, a logical consequence of hearing the individual stories is that after a few related or repeat stories, a pattern starts to emerge for the coach. While the coach may not declare to the client that they are living a particular story, in all cases they reflect back the observed pattern and inquire from the client what may be behind it.

The other use when I think of stories is, there are little stories and big stories.

Every coaching session, really begins with some little stories. So, last time we met, you were going to go away and try x, how did it go? That's a story when that client tells me how it went. Then, every story has added value to be mined....

Stories often give me the ability to say: huh, that's the third time I've heard that from you. What's really going on here? And why does it keep coming up?

It's the “big story” (“how the client sees himself or herself”) that often generates the cherished a-ha moment in a coaching engagement. The larger story explores the layers of depth and complexity that clients present and the meaning they seek from life. Any changes a person may make in coaching are more likely to have a lasting and meaningful impact when their broader patterns, and the larger narratives that embed the stories, are addressed (Drake, 2018). This impact was memorably described by a study participant as follows:

I help them see the red threads throughout the opportunities. Is this something that has followed you your entire career? And then I say you've been in this kind of role for the last 10 years. If this is not new to you, what is stopping you from addressing it? And typically, there is something that has happened. Maybe they were bullied as a child or their parents didn't pay enough attention to them or they were always searching for their parents' approval and trying to do the best. I like to call it "the thing behind the thing."

While developmental coaching has always focused on the person and not the problem, the rapid pace of change, (i.e., volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity [VUCA])<sup>8</sup> have placed additional demands on leaders to develop greater capacity in dealing with the problems of our time. What's needed to respond effectively to a rapidly changing external environment includes having the ability to anticipate multiple options for change, planning to make rapid shifts, and executing change quickly as time is better spent being adaptive and experimenting to apply the lessons learned from an evolving situation as opposed to putting a great deal of time and effort in doing an autopsy on what went wrong.

This approach has led to a distinction between horizontal and vertical development needed by leaders in which horizontal development comprises the knowledge, skills, abilities, and behaviors that result in higher performance. On the other hand, vertical development complements the horizontal by growing the clients' internal

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<sup>8</sup> VUCA, an acronym for Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous, is a term introduced by the U.S. Army War College to describe the dramatically changed environment in which military leaders now operate. As a result, the ways in which leaders had learned to operate on the battlefield were no longer effective in handling the challenges they now faced. The acronym has since been applied to business situations when companies and leaders operate in a similarly fast-paced environment in which the rate of change was increasing and pushing us past our limits (Deaton, 2018).



capacities to operate in more complex, systemic, strategic, and interdependent ways (Bluckert, 2019). Recognizing the pattern, or the larger story, also serves to identify the scale and scope of the client's challenge and their growth direction. One study participant made this comment, "The little story tells me what the client wants. The big story tells me what they need...What the core issue is. What the core work to be done within the engagement is."

At times it might not be clear to the coach where to focus one's attention during the coaching session because the threads may be all tangled up so what the client brings up as the session goal may just be one end. What the client really needs is help in making the connections to figure out what's really getting in the way of deciding on a course of action and moving ahead. Stories are a window into that vague unease.

I was in a coaching session this morning, where the CEO is facing all kinds of challenges....And I am listening to him and asking him questions. At the same time, I'm formulating. How can I best serve here? In what way can I help? Sometimes the clients have a problem that they are wanting to solve....(In such a case) I will be thinking about the options the client has in this situation...looking at things from a systems perspective...or, if it is a highly visible or public situation, who are all the stakeholders here? There's all kinds of things going on...and so I ask for a story, and I realize 'who is the human telling me this story?' is probably the most helpful thing I can do in this session....And so, I leaned forward and asked: "How are you doing?" His response helped me understand what's going on for him in the larger scheme of things.

### **“Searching for a Story” Is Unhelpful**

That said, there was active resistance from study participants to explicitly search for the/a central/big story of the client’s life in an executive coaching engagement. Only one of the coaches interviewed affirmed that a key learning objective was to search for a central theme in the client’s life, even as early as the intake session.

One can understand the coaches’ resistance from a fundamental tenet in coaching: Clients are capable and resourceful and have all the answers. The job of the coach is then to ask questions that lead to the client’s discovery process. Curiosity is open and playful and allows the coach and client to enter the deepest areas of a client’s life, side by side, curious about what they will find (Kimsey-House, 2016). When the clients also learn to become curious, it reduces some of their pressure and allows them to lower their guard and be vulnerable.

The interviewees believed that while they may want to know how the clients are getting in their own way, they choose to remain open-minded and broadly curious about the client’s life.

I start every engagement from a place of curiosity and fascination. A new client is opening up the first page of a new 500 page novel. I have read the back cover, in this case the initial conversation, which is how the book sells itself, but I have no idea what's going to happen, or what I'm going to experience with that client. So, I just have this kind of open curiosity and fascination. It's not that I explicitly want to learn this person's story....In fact, a lot of how I feel about the client is looking for an experience....And that serves most clients pretty well because we all like to be appreciated for being unique.

Accordingly, coaches choose to not let a few data points nudge them into forming an evaluation of the client, recognizing that multiple, interconnected stories are playing out simultaneously and impact each other, and the client, in ways large and small.

You're going to hear something that you've also heard in their (360) feedback (which you might be willing to reflect back to the client). However, trying to coach based on something that you alone heard in session one or session two isn't really gonna do you any good necessarily because you don't live in their life, you see them only in the room....For an hour every few weeks.

Our intuition colors how we interpret data. Despite the evidence, certain things seem more plausible than others, while others just don't make sense (*Confirmation Bias*). Many coaches, especially those with prior experience in corporate consulting, were aware of the need to avoid Confirmation Bias when the coach finds what she is searching for.

As a former consultant, I'm mindful of any mental shortcuts that might lead me to that whole consulting process around searching for data that confirms an initial hypothesis. And so, I consciously try to pay attention to any hypotheses that may be forming in my own mind, and observe my own thought process carefully and ask myself the question: Have I seen enough evidence of this pattern to reflect it back to the client?

This approach is also supported by the coaching literature on labeling (including personality types):

It is far easier to explain complex human behavior through the use of a few simple labels...the seductive aspect of labeling is that it provides us with the illusion of predictability and control. Attaching a label...provide(s) a valid explanation for

their past behavior, but we can also extrapolate to anticipate a client's future behavior....We sum up a leader through the use of labels like micro-manager, insecure, aggressive, team player, etc....Any evaluative label that we apply to our clients takes the form of a tautological argument, or self-fulfilling prophecy.

(Barner, 2017, p. 83)

With trust fundamental to the coach-coachee relationship, a more salient concern for the interviewees was the risk of damaging the client relationship, should the client perceive the coach as either judgmental or looking to validate an existing hypothesis.

I might be looking at their story (or stories) after a while, but probably not at the start. I will make use of assessments like the Core Values Index or the IEQ Nine, as shortcuts to how the person sees himself or herself. But I would say at the intake or the beginning, I try to keep that as uncluttered as possible with my own assumptions or speculations...what I am looking for is this is a good fit. And can they trust me?...And I'm not sure that they will trust me as much if they think I'm already speculating about them.

### **Integrating Different Client Stories**

Ultimately, in a process that parallels that in quilting, the coach weaves in the little stories together in a way that reveals the bigger stories the client is living to support the client's developmental goals.

The coach in a coaching session is working on a tapestry where you weave the different parts of the client's life and make an integrated picture....And I think that allowing them to go into the tapestry...it's a little bit of a dance that's going

on between the two (polarities). The past and the present...the humanity of them as a person, as well as within the business context.

The holistic client view benefits the coaching engagement as one can't separate the person from the professional. They both show up in a coaching session.

One of the questions I ask is: what do you think is stopping you from becoming the most effective leader you could be? And in answer to that kind of question, anything can come up. One woman said to me. I worry about myself, because I think of how my mother was, and I don't know if I need to bring this into coaching. So I said if you think it's relevant you should tell me about it. And she said, well, my mother just left us one day (unable to take any more abuse from my father). And I said, well, how are you in the work and I moved it (the conversation) very strongly into the workspace....And what of your story links to your fear or your concerns about being a leader? She said, it links because I keep everything inside...I am polite and agreeable like my mother. And when my boss asks me to do something, I just smile and say yes and work until midnight.

So many things happen to form the person. The impact of one's family system and culture shows up in the client's values and core beliefs, which lead to assumptions, life rules, and coping behaviors that are generally invisible to the client.

Adler's psychology. That's what I look at. What your current situation is. As well as how your adolescence has played out...I'm interested in what your family system was and what your role was in the family. I look for....What's happening now? Your work is the vehicle for your professional emergence. What's your playing field? Does this playing field work? How you're playing and how you

adapt to the world. To define what your main growth direction and objective is. Stories help fill things out....There may be a lot of emotional charges to your childhood. What does the world expect of me? And what do I expect of the world? And then we see how that plays out at work.

It's not only unhelpful to fragment the client between the personal and professional, but it may indeed be possible to leverage our clients' personal life and interests into the way they show up at work.

The client was the VP Sales. He was having trouble developing new business. He had a story about how he was inadequate as the VP Sales....But we talked at some point about how he spent his time away from work and it turned out that...he spent his spare time writing graphic novels....When he talked about his art, his confidence was high. There was no question about whether he could succeed.... So, I asked him if he could tell a different story about the VP of Sales to bring in the high energy elements from his artwork....He realized he could plan for and practice sales calls the way he practiced art, and use drawings in his sales development conversations....So, that's what he did and doubled his sales next year....Just by asking for it, I gave the client permission to merge the two stories...which is what he needed.

The interweaving of the different stories requires a certain skill on the part of the coach. The coach needs to be able to welcome the past or personal angle, but to do so in order to connect to the work agreed in coaching and move the conversation quickly back to the work situation. This approach takes balance in welcoming the full client story while maintaining the distinction between coaching and therapy.

And I kind of wondered, am I going to go into therapy here or what am I doing? But I followed the story and asked her... I think you started telling me the story when I asked you about being a leader. And what of your story links to your fear or your concerns about being a leader. So, the (personal) story she shared built that bridge for us both.

### **Re-Visioning Frees the Coachee From the “Tyranny of the Should”**

Almost all coaches interviewed for the study incorporate some form of visioning in their coaching process. While they may differ in terms of the stage at which they ask the client for a desired future vision or state (some as early as the first session, others after discussing the 360 feedback), this visioning is often done in concert with client goal setting or to support the coaching process. Coaches see immense value in asking the client to (re)vision a desired future state.

### **“Should Goals” Don’t Work**

During the last decade some people have engaged in debates on fundamental assumptions within coaching. While a few practitioners (e.g., Scoular) have challenged the notion that the client is the person sitting in front of the coach and asserted that “it’s the organization paying the bill” (Scoular, 2011, p. 65), others have taken a more nuanced view. Huffington posits that coaches need “dual listening: to the individual in the organization and to the organization in the individual” (Huffington, 2006, p. 45). More recent arguments have focused on the people (stakeholders) impacted by coaching (Goldsmith & Silvester, 2018) while others (Einzig, 2017) see the framework of coaching as including not just Partnership (coach-client) and Systemicity (everything

interconnected and interdependent, e.g., teams, organization), but also Purpose (authentic self of leader) and Spirituality (toward a greater good of society).

While the study participants accepted the role of the client's supervisor or the Human Resources department in setting the coaching objectives, there's a widespread belief that "should goals" cascaded down the organization to the coachee don't work. Even if weaknesses or performance gaps may have been replaced in the organizational vernacular with challenges or growth areas, the deficit-based framing still sets up a natural resistance from clients who see the constraints and limitations as a personal attack on their identity (Barner, 2017).

Neuroscience research shows that "should goals" trigger fear, and fear activates the sympathetic nervous system and Negative Emotional Attractors (NEA). Positive Emotional Attractors (PEA) and NEA are distinct psychophysiological states composed of distinct emotional, psychological, physiological, and neurological characteristics that create "a force around one's thinking, feeling, and behaviors" (Boyatzis, Rochford, & Taylor, 2015). One of the outcomes of activating NEA is that clients are less able to identify options and choices, impacting creativity.

The study participants observed that clients aren't motivated by "should goals" and often only go through the motions in coaching. As a result, they are unable to sustain motivation when they hit a rough patch at work.

Clients initially often set *should goals*. I *should* go for x than I *want* to go for...these are goals that their boss said they should work on...but not necessarily goals that they passionately care about...I have found that the clients who are looking for a coach to work towards a goal set by the boss very often are really



driven by fear and that when stuff gets hard they're just not going to have the energy to push toward that goal....I just don't think that works.

Rather than the "Push coaching" required to realize should goals, coaches believe in "Pull coaching" in service of goals that are magnetizing.

By asking for client to set goals, you are able to motivate the client to take ownership: that coaching isn't something which the company has asked me to do but this is what I want to do. It creates the element of desirability, and provides a sense of autonomy.

The problem with psychology in the twentieth century was to think that people are pushed by the past, instead of thinking they are pulled by the future (Seligman, 2009). When clients are able to choose a desired future while also incorporating the developmental input from the organization, they feel a greater sense of motivation and personal ownership. The future vision provides a sense of personal agency that is liberating and counters any feelings of victimhood that clients may have as a result of organizational changes.

Visioning is a transformative experience because it helps people see possibilities, instead of issues. Oh my god, I'm going through a reorg and I'm going to lose my job becomes: I have a choice. I can stay or I can go. If I stay, it looks like this. And that feels great. If I go, it looks like this. I'm not so sure about that. But **THEY** get to decide, instead of being a victim.

One of the attractors of the visioning process is the freedom to "have a do-over." As one study participant said, "If you make a mistake, or if you don't like the direction

you're heading in, and you don't like the picture, you can always start again. It's liberating to be able to do that."

What happens as a result of visioning is that coachees are able to align the coaching goals to their desired future direction and life purpose, allowing them to stay the course when, during the course of the coaching engagement, things get tough (e.g., job elimination as a result of new timeframe or organizational restructuring) and their personal resilience is tested.

We can be pushed down the road by deadlines and expectations and to-do lists....

Or we can be pulled down the road by the gravitational force of a compelling vision, like water running downhill. You can feel the difference between these two forces: pushed or driven on one hand or pulled irresistibly on the other.

Finding the compelling vision can take any goal, action, or outcome and invest it with new power. (Kimsey-House et al, 2011, p. 25)

This approach also aligns with the findings of Boyatzis and Akrivou (2006) who distinguished between an *ideal self* and an *ought self*. They defined the *ideal self* as partially conscious and partially unconscious and shaped by both social influences and personal conceptualization. Three components define the ideal self: (1) an image of a desired future that is (2) emotionally hopeful and (3) reflects a person's core identity. The ideal self manifests itself in a vision that articulates a person's "dreams, fantasies, and aspirations" (Boyatzis & Akrivou, 2006, p. 626).

As a process, visioning can be particularly beneficial to CEOs who cannot only reinforce their corporate vision with their individual one but also strengthen the power of

their storytelling, a key skill for leaders. “The best way to communicate with people you are trying to lead is often through a story” (Denning, 2011, p. 1).

A few interviewees emphasized their interest in using the coaching session to allow the client to practice this key skill.

I also believe, as an executive coach, leaders need to be storytellers. That is the sign of a good leader, the ability to tell a story and create that sense of belonging, that sense of community, with those that they lead....So, I often will ask, do you have a story that goes along with why you feel or think this way? So, I usually ask first for their stories, also as a way for them to get comfortable in their role of a storyteller.

In fact, for most of our history storytelling has been a natural part of leadership. “Long before the first formal business was established...the six most powerful words in any language were: Let me tell you a story” (Mathews & Wacker, 2010).

Finally, by creating images to accompany thoughts we can expand our mental capacities, facilitating both recall through double coding of images (first as words and then as images), but also amplify the network of neocortical connections between the left and the right hemispheres (De Beauport, 1996). Just like “What is the cause?” and “What is the effect?” are questions vital to rational thinking, “What does it look like?” can contribute significantly to learning, memory, and the richness of everyday life.

### **How Visioning Enables Client Change**

A desired future state shows what success looks like. It incorporates the personal and the professional. To be effective, a vision is both granular in detail and vivid in fleshing out the picture, the vividness serving to motivate the client. The holistic picture

is intended to create an emotional hook for the client by bringing in feelings and physical sensations into the process. To do this, it includes the monsters on the (Hero's) journey that must be overcome along the way.

I think it's got to be granular and detailed enough to know whether I'm stretching at all. So it's got to have say the rivers and the mountains and the trees. It's got to hook the person emotionally, get him excited so that he wants to get there. He's got to feel that it would be wonderful to reach that, it should kick in positive emotion possibility thinking.

At the same time the granularity of the vision focuses on the next steps to create a causal chain. In this way the vision links the client's action plan with the desired future state and creates the opportunity for accountability and follow-through on a personally authored vision.

I will ask the client: who is around you? And if the client gives me a name, say Steve, I will ask what is Steve doing with you in the future? How does his presence impact you? And, then during the engagement I will link in Steve in any agreed actions and follow-ups. So, how is Steve helping you move towards your goal?

The visioning process is supported by neuroscience in avoiding a focus on issues and weaknesses and instead focusing on possibilities. Arousing the PEA is critical when creating or affirming a personal vision (i.e., a sense of one's purpose and ideal self). Boyatzis et al. (2015) posited that for a vision to lead to sustained and desired change, it must be based on an ideal self; further, to create that vision of an ideal self a person needs to be in PEA, which occurs when the parasympathetic nervous system is activated.

Visioning helps clients clarify their values, which, in itself, helps them and the coaching process.

I'm working with a manager who's looking to shift into a director role in a different industry, he's more passionate about than the one he's in now. And I asked him describe in detail a day in his life when he's achieved that and asked a lot of questions about it. When do you wake up and what happens what happens at home before you go to work, what happens at work and what does your wife think of you now (in future)...To help him really understand what is he really looking for next....And that future for him has been compelling enough that he's realized that he would take a cut in pay from his current role. And before we started talking he said, I want to make X. And then we started talking about his desired life and he realized that...money was way lower on the values scale....It's like every story clients tell is actually a story about hearing what's important to them.

It's not just clients; coaches also benefit from the visioning process by better understanding the growth direction that appeals to the client.

I don't plant a seed of what or who it should look like...but they show me and then they paint this very vivid picture that helps very much. They tell the story of what they want to be and who and what they admire, and that makes it much easier to help them achieve the goal that they're painting for themselves, because then it's very clear to me.

An image is a necessary starting point. Indeed, a picture is worth a thousand words. The *Picture Superiority Effect* describes the phenomenon in which people remember pictures better than they remember the corresponding words (Defeyter, Russo, & McPartlin, 2009); thus, visual sources have a much greater and more lasting impact than text. Pictures are perceptually more distinct than words; they are also believed to assess meaning more directly than words, facilitating greater recall (McBride & Doshier, 2002).

The image isn't just easier to recall but it connects with us emotionally and engages us in a story we feel compelled to complete. The image intrigues us but doesn't reveal all the secrets and mysteries to come, allowing for our personal imprint to shape how it takes its final form. To that extent, an image is an unfinished story that invites us to play with it, be creative, and bring it to life. As the *Ziegarnik Effect* shows, human beings are much more inclined to finish something that has been started; thus, the re-vised story that now has pathos, ethos, and logos has a greater impetus for fulfillment.

Why I like metaphors and images is that sometimes you can talk about them distantly and abstractly, such as, the sunflowers are not getting water...people don't care about the sunflower...instead of acknowledging that I'm the one who needs love and affection or recognition. So, I find that a benefit of metaphors and images. They liberate and free up the person to talk about something else....I give them the power to choose the image. The safety of the abstraction allows them to express their needs fully and sidestep any challenges they may have in being vulnerable.

Coaches can choose to work with any image form: still or moving.

I would use something like. Tell me the movie of your life. Let's go back to what is the movie of your life? Who would play you in the movie of your life? How does the movie of your life end? Where are you now in the movie of your life? It would be a series of questions....And then at some point in the future, I will say, let's go back, remember that movie that we talked about. It is your life. Where are you now in that movie? So it becomes a way to go back to the story and maybe a way to restore the movie.

Even if the client isn't literally painting a future state vision, the coach encourages the client to paint a picture using language, paying attention to the metaphors and verbs that show desires, actions, and connections between intent and behaviors.

I work very strongly with verbs. When clients say something like I want to communicate better. I'll say to them. Remember verbs at school? Verb is a doing word. Like I want to enable, I want to convince, I want to sell. I want to empower. Now, all of those are communication words, so which communication words do you want? And let's look at what does that mean. If the client says I want to persuade, I'll say: ok, persuade is different from convince. And then we will play with the verbs and end up covering a lot of territory that helps the client get clarity.

### **Re-Visioning Around a New "Way of Being"**

Embedded in my preference to study *personal myth* instead of central story, plotline, or narrative was the opportunity for clients to benefit from myths, the universal

stories that have guided cultures and societies through the ages—also considered part of the collective unconscious in the shape of archetypes (Jung, 1981).

In my coaching practice I deploy a narrative approach combined with a strengths-based perspective from Positive Psychology. Accordingly, when clients identify their goals for the coaching engagement, I use data from the client intake (capturing self-awareness) and the 360 feedback process (for validation or elaboration) on the client's strengths. The coaching engagement then focuses on helping the clients utilize their personal strengths to reach the goals they set for themselves.

To the extent that the client is unaware of, or fails to remember, their personal resources, stories elicited within the coaching engagement also serve as a mechanism for them to remember how they handled challenging situations in the past to reach their goals. One of the core assumptions of Solution Focused Brief Coaching is that clients already have experience with the solution (Szabo, Meier, & Dierolf, 2008). Accordingly, as coaches we can take our clients on a resource walk, or treasure hunt, into their past and look for small and large signs of the desired solution.

But how can coaches help clients who are unable to appropriately access a resource or strength needed to achieve their goals or desired future? It's possible there's no comparable prior experience that can serve as a guide to the future they are trying to build for themselves.

It appeared to me that the answer may lie in role models or heroes who could serve as personal mentors to clients and guide clients based on their public myth. While some of these heroes needn't be public figures but family members personally known to the clients, there could be other examples from popular culture or history that could serve



as inspiration. Also, contrary to the conventional expectations of a mentor given the democratization by technology, it's no longer necessary to have physical access to a mentor.

Mentors provide bespoke guidance. They take a personal interest in you. It's customized, rare, and expensive. Heroes live their lives in public, broadcasting their model to anyone who cares to look. I find heroes everywhere...WWHD. What would my hero do? I find people who speak to me over my shoulder, virtual muses, who encourage me to deal with a situation the way they would. (Godin, 2010, para. 1-3)

That was one of the elements related to re-visioning that I explicitly inquired into: Do role models (or icons/archetypes) help? Do you, as an executive coach, invite the client to model themselves after someone successful or famous in history?

Their responses brought up the value the coaches saw in drawing attention to a role model. The study participants agreed that an inquiry into role models would reflect client aspirations and suggest values coachees might not have acknowledged openly or even to themselves. It could also indicate a story the clients want to live out. One study participant said, "I'm more interested in finding out what story is the client wanting to live out. Not so much, who's your role model?...Other than for an inquiry into their values."

Bringing up a role model or public icon was also seen as a way to give situational feedback to the client in an indirect way, should the coach believe that the client would only be able to accept something about themselves if the feedback was provided in an indirect manner.

In sharing something that's parallel but not exactly equal, it gives them (the clients) something to...come back to themselves and say, Oh, I'm like that. Or, that situation's like my situation....Sometimes they need that indirect path to own it, like when they're doing something...unhelpful. But I also know that they're so defined by that if I just go direct, it may not work...and may just shut them down versus open them up.

The common theme across all these elements was a recognition that role models (or heroes/icons) provide strategies to the coaching client to deal with a situation. However, despite the arguments in favor of learning from heroes or icons, the interviewees strongly resisted the idea that coaches should suggest a role model to their clients.

### **Resistance to the Use of Role Models**

Central to the coaches' resistance to the use of role models is a belief in adhering to the coaching philosophy of not advising the client. Only the client can really know what to do because only the client knows the whole story and can actually follow through with actions and live with the consequences (Rogers, 2016).

That said, many categories of interventions are available arising from the intent of the practitioner: from prescriptive to supportive (Heron, 1990). In interviewing the coaches, however, suggesting a role model to the client was seen as the coach as assuming too much power in the relationship, which functions best as a relationship of equals; where power is granted to the coaching relationship, not to the coach; and where the coach and client work together to design an effective working relationship that meets the coachee's needs (Kimsey-House et al., 2011).

From a process perspective, coaches who rely on being in the moment and using an emergent style didn't feel comfortable in using a tool that made for a contrived process.

For me coaching is very much emergence. I let it emerge within me. There's a pretty big sense of allowing internal thoughts, feelings, ideas to arise within me.

I'm also very pragmatic. It's not like I'm thinking hard about what to do next.

Whatever comes up in the coaching, I will have ideas in the moment of what to do with it.

An additional concern was noted that while the role model may be considered as a way of motivating the client, it may inadvertently have the opposite impact should the comparison to an icon or successful public figure make the client feel inadequate instead.

I think it really helps if it (role model) relates....It must be something that they can buy into. But, I wouldn't want them to compare and sort of say, Oh, I must be a Steve Jobs....I'm going to be like him and follow his 10 steps or 20 steps to success, as that I think could make them even feel inadequate because you can't be that person!

Further, it's fair to acknowledge that every leadership journey is unique, and successful leaders want to chart their own path as opposed to copying anyone. While they may think of icons when considering their legacy, CEOs want to be seen as unique. They are more concerned in being the best version of themselves as opposed to comparing themselves to others (even if comparisons inevitably happen, as a function of a competitive Type-A personality).

I think most of the folks I'm working with aren't excited about trying to imitate a whole lot....CEOs don't really see themselves as imitators. I think they're trying to figure out who they authentically are...to live into that. I'm more likely to ask them what legacy they're wanting to build. How they want to be known. What's on their tombstone? More that, in terms of what story are they wanting to live out, not so much who's your role model? It's them and their best self is probably more the issue for me.

Given the strong pushback in the interviews to the use of icons or role models, I wondered whether there was a way to benefit from the wisdom of role models while not offering, or inviting, the client one.

### **Integrating Learning Through “a New Way of Being”**

The interviews clarified that coaching benefits from a desired future view in which multiple stakeholders involved in the coaching process (coachee, supervisor, Human Resources, board, and team members) have agreed to explicit coaching outcomes.

By shifting attention to the desired future and having the client vision it in detail to capture both logical flow and emotional salience, one can holistically focus on both the *doing* and the *being*. The study participants unanimously concurred that a measure of success for the coaching engagement was how differently the client was showing up in the latter coaching sessions, compared with how the client was showing up at the beginning of coaching.

Towards the end of the engagement, I do mention to the client, Hey Bob (say) it's so interesting that the conversations we've had in the last four or five months have been wildly different than the ones you wanted to talk about when we started...

like, remember how many conversations were about how to navigate the board dynamics and...you haven't mentioned the board in a long time, it's about you, your leadership style, what you want to do and how you want to be...and, they're like, wow! I'm glad you reminded me of that...I help them see the progress they've made and how they are showing up now.

In fact, the way the client shows up was deemed as equally, if not more important, to the long-term success of the client as opposed to meeting the goals because the "way of being" gave both the coach and the client confidence that the client would be better able to navigate future challenges beyond those presented by the current situation and organizational environment.

When you're reflecting the progress back to the client, it should capture a change in the client's way of being. Because as coaches we do focus on tangible metrics agreed with client...but we should also reflect how the client is showing up...their way of being....One of my clients is really having a hard time right now, and I said to him, you are the right leader for now, and you will handle it well and with great courage and presence. That's what I felt he needed to hear....It's not you've got this, but you *are* this...you are the person, you were meant to be.

This focus on the way of being that supports the client's desired future vision provides the opening for the coach to invite the client to focus on the certain qualities (e.g., courage, compassion, curiosity, humility, acceptance, openness) they need to fulfill their vision that they currently don't or can't access appropriately (i.e., either not using or overusing) for any reason. In effect, it's a matter of asking the client: To change the story, how would you need to show up?

You needn't be like any other person, but you can learn from their practices, or some personal characteristic or quality that supports you, while staying true to yourself....So you think about, as founders, tech entrepreneurs, how do you balance the paradox of insane creativity with what may seem to you sort of boring detail (diligence): Operational Excellence. Which, as a CEO, is also what you're responsible for.

The same emphasis on incorporating new qualities in service of the client's vision rather than evoking a role model or character (archetype) was described as follows:

The future story is kind of describing the ways of being rather than coming up with a character....Describing the qualities that they (need to get what they) wanted. So if somebody was really out there making things happen and the challenge is sort of...a big and aggressive personality. The new narrative might be one of a courageous and magnanimous leader. So there's strength but there's also more heart and...sort of bringing everyone along with them rather than beating people up to get them to move. So it would be more...the way of being then than a character per se.

This focus on a new way of being is also a way to address work behavior that has its roots in their family of origin.

Going back to: what is the thing behind the thing? It can be adapted to where they are right now: when they were five years old they may have had a problem with their dad as an authority figure. Yes, you can acknowledge and own that but your manager is not your father, or your mother. And...you can take a fresh

perspective on...what kind of relationship do you want to have with that individual. How would you like to show up? What do you need to do that?

Bringing up a desired quality or way of being could also offer hope to clients by demonstrating that someone publicly seen as successful had overcome a limitation or hardship that the client currently faces and sees as debilitating and/or insurmountable.

I try and find something comparable (in a public icon's life). If a client says I'm an introvert and struggle to work with people all day, my energy's low. I'd say do you know entrepreneurs can be introverts? And they might say I can't think of any. And I'd say have you read Richard Branson's book and how he needs to recharge...how he needs to go to his place in Virgin Islands to have a quiet time, recharge and come back a crazy man?

In this manner, clients can retain their authenticity in becoming their own best self and maintain personal agency in creating options that better serve their future vision.

Not only does this approach build capacity for the client while helping them stay true to their values, it also ties in well with the stage of adult development and personality patterns that coaches use to help the client internalize the learnings that can yield the desired personal transformation.

We have them (clients) take personality assessments, like the Enneagram. And then we have them read through the results and talk through what it would be like at the healthiest level. So, if I'm an Eight (Enneagram Type), when am I at my best? What does that look like? What are the qualities I don't use that others do?

It can be an incredible way for people to understand the qualities they can access (e.g., by looking at other Eight Enneagram types) that they currently don't.

### **Summary**

In summary, executive coaches can facilitate new possibilities, personal and/or professional, to emerge when they make their clients aware of their ability to construct and co-create their reality by understanding and re-visioning their personal myths. A lot of what's seen as "learning" focuses on information, knowledge, and a cognitive view of intelligence. However, what that leaves out is how emotions and intuition play an integral role in our way of knowing and in our development. It also leaves out our spiritual connection with our fellow humans and the world. By embracing a new way of being, clients can build their capacity to observe and interpret differently, have a new sense of their power and potential, identify new choices and courses of action, and realize the desired outcomes they have visioned for themselves; thereby, they can be *on the way* to becoming the best version of themselves.



## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

When I started thinking about the topic for my capstone research, I saw a blue ocean ahead of me given the still limited empirical research on narrative within executive coaching, particularly when it comes to the *Discovery process* in which clients share their story, reflect on it, and make sense of what it means to them. Narrative Coaching is still a relatively new model compared to other established coaching models such as Cognitive Behavioral or Gestalt; as noted, Drake, the “founder of Narrative Coaching,” published his book on this subject matter in 2017. I was also excited to revisit the field of Personal Mythology in the context of executive coaching, given the considerable lapse of time since the field was made “fashionable” by the waves of publications that followed Campbell’s work on *The Hero’s Journey*.

As I started my own coaching practice, my curiosity was piqued by coaching models that explicitly invite coachees to live a new narrative. Having studied Narrative Coaching during coursework at the University of Pennsylvania’s Organizational Dynamics program, the strategic intent behind the approach resonated with me, and I incorporated it in my practice.

However, I saw mixed results with this element in my client engagements. While my reflecting to the clients what I saw as their existing narrative often struck a chord with them, they seemed mostly cool to the invitation to a new narrative. After a while I realized that even while presenting it as an invitation, coaches were assuming too much power in the process—which was leading to client resistance. Clients did not feel a high (at times, *any*) sense of ownership as they hadn’t come up with the narrative. The

effectiveness of a new narrative seemed limited to a good starting point of a conversation on customer wants and aspirations. On the coach's end, I learned that obsessing about the "perfect narrative" was getting in the way of the overall coaching process, with the invitation to a new narrative actually creating performance anxiety.<sup>9</sup>

So the capstone allowed me to research a viable process for clients to (re)author their story while enabling coaches to adhere to the fundamental coaching principles of client agency and resourcefulness, ensuring an emergent, yet not contrived, client experience. That process is a way to provide practical guidance to coaching practitioners while answering my research questions of how executive coaches discern the existing story (or stories) the client is living under the umbrella construct of Personal Mythology, as well as how to help the coachee author a more empowering personal myth serving not only the coachee but also the different stakeholders in the coaching engagement.

Initially, I had expected a linear process, with the coach first discerning a (major) theme or story in the client's life and then working with the client to assess if that story were still helpful, or re-authoring a more empowering and desirable one instead. But, I learned that while the process *can* be linear (e.g., if client revisits the desired future after discovering a story he/she had been living), it doesn't need to be so in the journey of personal transformation. The new/re-visioned life story can be independent of the insights gained from understanding an existing story. Key learnings are summarized below:

### **1. Ask for stories to ignite change.**

*"No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man."* – Heraclitus

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<sup>9</sup> This barrier (multiple quotes) was confirmed during my research as a number of experienced practitioners who were certified in the model of offering a narrative had moved away from doing so over the years.

By asking for stories, coaches transcend the boundary between assessment and intervention. The power of stories in coaching became manifestly clear to me when many study participants acknowledged that they explicitly asked the client for stories with the intention to start the change process. Whether it was a belief in the strength of stories as a medium for learning, a recognition of neuroscience research that we humans are wired for story, or as an opportunity to invite the whole client (personal/professional, cognitive/emotional/somatic) into the coaching space, simply by inquiring into a story the coach could draw the client's attention into behavioral options at many levels—actor, agent, and author (McAdams, 1993).

The simplicity of the question—with an economy of words, “tell me about that”—ensures that clients who may be resistant to the use of *visible* tools and techniques in coaching can have few qualms about the intervention, are less guarded, and may be open to revealing their identities and how they construct reality. At the same time inquiring into a story allows the coach to both use a question to spark the conversation and avoid any fears the client may have of being interrogated or cross-examined during coaching. The research also indicated that stories allow coaches to address inner doubts about whether questions alone are enough for coaching and to explore what other intervention techniques a coach can deploy with a business client.

## **2. Quilt “big stories” from “little stories.”**

*“What matters in life is not what happens to you, but what you remember and how you tell it.” – Gabriel Garcia Marquez (Living to Tell the Tale)*

I expected more coaches to explicitly search for a central story (or stories) the client may be living, which, looking back, might be a result of using many of McAdams's

(1993) life-story interview questions during the client intakes that I conduct. I was pleasantly surprised to see the conviction of the interviewees to not look for a story but to be open to any patterns that come up during the sessions—starting from whatever the client brings up, which usually describes something that happened (“the little story”). The client sets the goal and agenda of a coaching session (not just the overall engagement) whereas the coach manages the process in service of the client’s goals. So whatever the client shares in a story—whether a disagreement with a colleague, tension with the boss—serves as a window into the client’s worldview, internal narrative, self-talk, passions, and wants (“the big story”).

As coaches help the client in the moment, they also pull back to take in the bigger picture in a process described by Drake (2018) as “a bird circling the tree” in which the bird drops down to examine closely any branches for insects and then rises again to take an overall view of the tree and the forest. Similarly, coaches examine the individual story while taking a metaview of any discernible patterns of thought or behavior that we then reflect back to the client for inquiry. The pattern/repeat behavior—whether we call it the “thing behind the thing” or personal myth—serves as an opportunity in coaching to ensure meaningful growth and self-generation for the client, not simply address an identified professional challenge. This fundamental work of integrating different client stories, big and small, is entirely in line with the coaching principle of “coach the person, not the problem” and allows for the client’s vertical development.

### **3. (Re)Vision a desired personal myth.**

*“Myths are intended to break the spell of time and release us from the immediate pressures and limitations of daily life.”* – Michael Meade (2012, chapter 6)

At the time of writing my research proposal I had chosen the word *Re-Visioning* as the name for the process used to update or to birth a myth. The name was inspired by the metaphor of the lens for the construct of *personal mythology*; our personal mythology is the lens through which we perceive the world, its values, and assumptions that color all that we see. During the course of my research, the go-to approach for authoring a new or updated myth remains *Visioning* but it now refers to a specific process, with explicit steps and guidelines, within coaching. I was surprised by the number of coaches who use *Visioning* as a process to help the client chart a future direction and as a complement (and at times replacement) to the traditional goal-setting process. At the heart of asking the client to use imagination, through visioning, is the coaches' conviction that if the client is stuck in a pattern or story, and immobilized by deeply held emotions or values, options or goals derived in a purely rational manner would be insufficient for forward movement.

Some debate exists on the use of goals in coaching. On the one hand, having Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Time-Bound (SMART) goals are a way of both motivating and holding clients accountable. On the other hand, many goals in executive coaching end up being cascaded down to the coachee as a result of a performance review or developmental feedback. As discussed above, these "should goals" unhelpfully trigger the sympathetic nervous system of the coachee and get in the way of client creativity or generativity. The study participants spoke to their own experience that many clients lost interest in following through with these goals when things took a downturn (e.g., organizational restructuring, downsizing).

Visioning can be seen as a motivating process that creates a magnetizing pull in the coachee to realize that future. It's not only a way to align different stakeholders

(organizational, family, community) but also an opportunity to align with a personal direction that allows for a major course correction in line with personal values, purpose, and identities that may have shifted given the client's life stage. Visioning can help clients re-author a story they've been living that no longer serves or empowers them. Obviously, not all coachees need to chart a course different from their current one; for those clients visioning will serve to make explicit the intervening stages in their journey to keep them motivated to persist in the face of headwinds and offer an accountability mechanism during the coaching process.

While most study participants who spoke of the need for visioning had an image (still or moving) or picture in mind when they describe visioning (e.g., saying “paint a picture for me” to the client) in which the picture/image either triggers a story or induces one to anticipate a new story that fits the image, there's no reason for the vision not to include text or take the form of a narrative. While pictures and images may be easier for the brain to encode and retrieve (*Picture Superiority Effect*, described earlier), words allow people to better capture and describe complexity and nuance. A story would thus activate and tap into multiple parts of the brain: visual, linguistic, and symbolic. We see this effect when a visual cue triggers a flood of related verbal information, which can provide clients with not only aspiration but also creativity in overcoming any hurdles on their transformational journey.

#### **4. Focus on “a new way of being.”**

*“What is essential is invisible to the eye.” – Antoine Saint De Exupery (The Little Prince)*

Similar to the stages of human consciousness and the corresponding models of organizational development (Laloux, 2014), many generations of coaching are practiced side by side. While coaching has always had a focus on future action(s) from the client—to differentiate clearly from therapy and counseling and thus on the *doing* part of learning and development—there has been less attention to the *being* part of human development other than (primarily) in the fields of ontological and positive psychology coaching. This approach has ramifications in terms of how sustainable the client’s development is in the longer term and to what extent the client is prepared to handle future challenges. That focus drives my interest in vertical development, particularly in light of the VUCA world we live in.

While analyzing the data I came to appreciate the frustration Braun and Clarke (2006) have with the oft-used phrase in research, “themes emerging from the data,” for there is no such thing. A researcher brings social constructivism and their worldview in looking at what story the data are telling. In my case, I didn’t expect to find that particular theme, but while reading the interview transcripts I noticed that the interviewees were telling me about the importance of “a new way of being” to realize a future vision—and in some cases making the realization with me when I reflected that back to them in the moment. Some saw the “new way of being” as incorporating the human *Shadow*. Others with a strengths-based perspective saw that human change needed to support the vision as a new personal strength or trait. The common theme in both perspectives appeared to be the need to integrate into their being something the coachees

had lost along the way as a result of separation—perhaps in fragmentation at work or earlier on in their past (even childhood) by disowning a part of their sense of self.

There are two paths of achieving personal transformation. One can let go of a limiting pattern based on an existing self-image, and one can let in a new sense of self. In the former the coachees let go of what is holding them back from who they are or could be, whereas the latter (new sense of self) moves them forward toward a new identity. And in answering: “Who do I choose to be?” coachees move beyond the specifics of the situation or the problem to a choice on a way of being, and on the path of answering the existential question: “Who am I?”

Answering “Who am I?” provokes client introspection that is in itself beneficial. Beyond the clarity on identity is the ability to integrate one’s different selves. As Tolle (1999) asserts: “You are not your mind” (p. 11). Given the premium organizations place on intellect, rationality, and cognitive skills—further reinforced by cultural and religious values (e.g., “the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” from Matthew 26:40-43)—many people separate from or disown the value of their body in allowing them to flourish. This separation leads to limiting behaviors and outcomes. The disconnect in prizing cognition as a way of knowing is that all of our habits—how we act, talk, think, and respond—are embedded in our body and into our neuromuscular system (Flaherty, 2005). These habits allow us to respond to situations and stimuli whereas we may not have had the time to process them cognitively. No matter how profound our cognitive insights may be, they are necessary but not sufficient to bring about long-term change.

More importantly, introspection on “who am I?” leads one to confront questions about one’s essence: the soul. For we are not simply material beings but souls. Ironically,



while the etymology of psychology (“logos”: study, “psyche”: mind or soul; in the Microsoft Word Thesaurus for “psyche” we find: soul (n): soul, spirit,<sup>10</sup> essence, being, inner self; mind (n): mind, consciousness, awareness, intellect, ego) would lead one to expect a greater debate on the soul, much of psychology (other than Depth Psychology) sidesteps the soul and focuses instead on traits and personality. I expect a discussion of the soul to become mainstream psychology in coming decades, similar to how positive psychology flipped the switch from an excessive focus on mental illnesses to what instead could help humans flourish. Similarly, the unhappiness and malaise people experience despite ample signs of material success suggest a variance from their essence/true self or why they are on this earth (or, *calling*).

Accordingly, in answering the question: Who am I? One can bring in the soul, not just the head, heart, and body, into our awareness. How can executive coaches support spiritual integration during the engagement? I believe part of the answer is in welcoming beauty and mystery into our lives to support the spirit to flourish by elevating human consciousness. Coaches can help the client consciously engage their spirit by working back from the desired future vision. Let’s say that future vision leads the client to suggest that they would like to be more courageous in their way of being. The coach can then recommend practices to the client such as saying no at work, joining Toastmasters, displaying vulnerability publicly, or practicing a warrior pose to embody the quality and

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<sup>10</sup> The difference between soul and spirit is much debated. Wilber (2000) describes an evolutionary sequence from matter to body to mind to soul to spirit (small “s”), each transcending and including, each with a greater depth and consciousness and wider embrace, until an individual’s consciousness touches infinity (“Kosmic consciousness”) that is Spirit (capital “S”) awakened to its true nature. Alternatively, Meade describes how spirit rises like air and fire while soul descends like water and earth. “There is a struggle between spirit and soul in each life. Without the lift and light of the spirit, the soul can become too heavy to move forward. Without the shading of the soul, what could become wise can become too sure of itself and too certain of the way....Spirit and soul are trying to come together to unite, but it’s usually the depth of soul that’s missing” (Meade, n.d., Podcast Episode 126, The Dance of Spirit and Soul).

to create new neural pathways by repetition. Similar practices can support a new way of being for qualities such as positivity, compassion, curiosity, openness, and love.

Practices are needed to embody the way of being. *Being* is not a cognitive act as experience is what instills the quality in our inner world. Being represents a profound internal shift because a shift in mindset and presence leads to a knock-on impact on self-awareness and thus on the words and actions that flow from that state of self-awareness. In effect, your *being* involves your *doing* on the way to your *becoming*.

The human soul is a living paradox – neither a predetermined personality nor a completely open possibility. The point in this life is not simply to “become somebody,” but to become who we were each intended to be when we first entered this world. For each of us has the most to give and contributes most meaningfully when we become who we were intended to be from the beginning. That is the inside story and the hidden message that is etched upon each soul. (Meade, 2016, chapter 7, “A concealed mission” section)

As someone who subscribes to The Integral Theory (Wilber, 2008), that’s how I chose to read the data related to a new “way of being,” which some study participants explicitly spelled out as “qualities” while others did so implicitly. To me, it brings together all the competencies clients need to flourish: cognitive, emotional, relational, somatic, and spiritual. Evoking new qualities is also a more expansive approach to personal transformation than what I expected before conducting the research interviews. At that stage, despite the references within the literature around The Hero’s Journey to “qualities” (e.g., strength, compassion, intelligence, which map to Jungian archetypes of Warrior, Lover, and Magician), I expected the client to choose a future vision in which

the inner work to author a new story would entail a strengths-based approach or, alternatively, live a life more fully aligned with one's values. In these scenarios the public figure or archetype could serve as a role model for a desired strength or, more likely, as a guide to action or decision-making, much in the tradition of What Would Jesus Do? (WWJD). What I've learned since is that it's more impactful to integrate a personal quality (by practices, or doing) into one's being that reinforces other manifest/existing client qualities in a manner that sets them off on the way to becoming their true (or *best*) self.

This personal transformation can also be described through the archetypal dynamics of *Initiation*—the process through which the human soul continuously renews itself. The *Water of Life* is a story capturing this archetypal process:

A king is dying from a mysterious illness and the entire realm is fast becoming a wasteland. The old way of living has become stuck and the only way to heal the king and restore the vital flow of life to the country is to find the Water of Life.... There are three royal sons who are faced with the task of renewing the realm. The two older sons of the realm set out to find the holy water, but fail because they are arrogant and seek only personal gain. The only one who can find the missing element and bring healing to the land is the dreamy, idealistic, youngest son of the king. Only the youngest son is willing to admit that he doesn't know exactly what to do or where to turn. He is also willing to listen to the strange dwarf that everyone else ignores....The youngest brother or sister represents the true seeker in each person's soul...he must awaken to the dream in the soul or everyone will suffer and the world will become a wasteland. (Meade, 2006, Preface)

To give voice to the longing of our soul is to reveal a side of ourselves that we have become adept at keeping hidden from others and ourselves. We feel shame in admitting something that we cannot even describe; to protect ourselves we hide behind the masks of the different roles we inhabit until we have even forgotten our authentic self. Accordingly, when it comes to the human soul, the real struggle is the challenge to reconnect to the source of one's life and to truly become oneself.

Understandably, not every coachee may be interested in the existential concerns of freedom, connection, and meaning of life. Being is still a real concern for those clients, and not something intangible or abstract. Existing coaching literature highlights *being* as a key element in coaching, articulated as follows by Hargrove (2008):

Being is the context that shapes who we are in the world, as well as the way we think and interact with others.... Leadership is a matter of being a leader, not just having a position. Inspiration is a matter of being inspired. Producing extraordinary results is a matter of being extraordinary and being results oriented. Fostering a great team effort requires being a team player. (p. 77)

The Japanese have a word for connecting mind, body, and spirit: *Kokoro*. To be a great Kabuki dancer or tea master requires both mastering the technique and evoking the way of being that is consistent with the discipline: having a calm and centered inner spirit. To excel in one's craft thus requires attention to not just knowledge and skills but also the spiritual side of the equation (Hargrove, 2008).

### **Directions for Future Research**

I have thoroughly enjoyed the capstone journey as it has allowed me to take

multiple perspectives—from both literature and established practitioners—on the use of stories to help business leaders flourish. My intent all along has been to outline a process that can be put into practice while both staying true to the principles of coaching and supporting long-term client development. Along the way I've taken the liberty to weave threads across disciplines and make connections that have made sense to me from the different cultures that have shaped and continue to inform my worldview.

As a next step in my research journey I would be interested in exploring in practice and study the effectiveness of the identified process to re-vision personal myths and examining how all the elements work together. As a narrative coach, I have obviously used stories myself to understand the client's construction of reality but I haven't explicitly asked them with the intent to ignite change.

Further, thus far in my coaching practice I have followed the dominant paradigm of focusing on goals during coaching and am interested to supplement that with visioning to align purpose and direction, as well as to satisfy all stakeholders. Whether it is possible to satisfy different stakeholders through a future personal vision itself can be evaluated from the perspectives of success, mechanics, and business and personal outcomes. Visioning as a way to re-author personal myth provides many research opportunities including identifying the appropriate stage within coaching engagement (initiation, after delivery of 360 feedback) and the form of visioning (image, metaphor, story, multimedial). Finally, further research on the effectiveness of practices that focus on the integration of the *being* across from the coach can benefit both practitioners as well as researchers.

It would also be useful to conduct a longitudinal study that tracks the coaching process and the longer term outcomes achieved by a control group of clients, including sustaining and building on the progress once the coaching engagement is complete. The scope of my research was transformational (as opposed to performance or horizontal) multimonth coaching focusing on long-term growth and navigating unfamiliar territory through vertical development. Accordingly, it would be helpful to see if the clients indeed develop the capacity to better meet work-life challenges in the long term and how and to what extent the coaching engagement contribute to those outcomes.

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