

What Happens in the Silence? The Real Art of Coaching

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I have been invited to speak about silence in coaching.

And therein lies a challenge – because you have invited me to *speak*. And today, oxymoronicly, I would like to speak... about silence. During the months of preparing, I began to face the futility of this. It reminded me of my experience at university in the music history courses listening to lecture after lecture and taking mountains of notes about the music of the great Western composers. I loved the courses. But I remember one day thinking that the only thing I had learned indelibly was that the words about the music are not the *music*.

And in a similar sense, what I want to say today cannot be said.

But I found encouragement in a short poem by W B Yeats, who, providentially on our topic today, finds words for the wordless.

We can make our minds so like still water
That beings gather about us,
That they may see, it may be,
Their own images,
And so live for a moment,
With a clearer, perhaps even with a fiercer life,
Because of our quiet.

Perhaps I should sit down now; Yeats has said it.

But if we venture with his truth into the world of coaching, we see the most remarkable thing. We see, I think, the secret to the real art, and there the real value, of coaching. We see how as coaches we can move from the lectures to the music.

To explore this we do well to begin with an insight from another kind of genius. A few years ago Steve Jobs, the Founder of Apple, was the graduation speaker for Stanford University. Standing in front of that bastion of success, he said, ‘One of the best things that ever happened to me in my life was to get fired from my own company. It was the best thing because I got to be a beginner again. I got to start over. Starting over releases you from dogma, and from the effects of other people’s thinking.’

I agree with him. And I propose that today we do just that; that we start over -- that we start over specifically by asking: What *is* the purpose of coaching, and where do we look for its value?

Many coaches say that the purpose of coaching is to take clients from where they are now to where they want to be. Many say in the next breath that, in organisations, the purpose of coaching is to take clients from where they are now to where the sponsor wants them to be.

Hearteningly, a few say that the purpose of coaching is for clients to *think*. Given that the quality of everything our clients do depends on the quality of the thinking they do first, generating a client's finest thinking is surely the point of it all.

I would go further, though. I would say that the purpose of coaching is for clients to think – *for themselves*.

For themselves changes everything. *For themselves* requires new expertise.

For themselves startles us into seeing that if we look in the wrong place, we find the wrong thing. If we look in the wrong place, we find the coach; but we miss the client. We miss the source of the value of the session. We miss the treasure.

We miss our clients' *own* fresh, dazzling thinking, conceived *for themselves*, for the first time, sometimes with quality that can take their breath away. And ours.

And in so doing, we miss, I think, the chance to unleash something huge and beautiful and desperately needed in our world.

We *could* decide never again to miss that chance. Second by second as we coach, we could hold in our minds the question:

'How far can this person go in their *own* productive, original thinking before they need mine?

And how much further than that?

And how much further even than that can they go for *themselves* before they need my thinking?'

And, fascinated, we could decide to hear the answer. How far can they go? Far. Far. Further than we can imagine. Often all the way.

But to achieve this quality of thinking clients need from us, first and possibly only, the most powerful coaching expertise of all: generative attention and its uncorrupted silence. All other tools can wait.

Attention and silence. Can that ever really be enough? Yes. Often. Far more often than we are ever taught to expect. In fact, we have hardly had a chance to find out just what attention and silence can produce. We are too busy preventing it.

In fact, many of us have been taught explicitly to prevent it. Some coaching programmes, for example, assess us and the value of our coaching on the basis of what we say, and how soon we say it.

Too often we are taught to listen only long enough to understand enough to come in with our words: to summarise, to diagnose, to make connections, to challenge; to offer a model, a theory, an inventory; and even to be non-directive in order, if we are honest, to direct.

These programmes teach us – to speak.

Our coaching is often superb. But I wonder what new levels of superb we might reach if we could become expert at generating this kind of attention, this silence.

Could we begin by seeing that attention is an act of creation? That it creates thinking in our clients? That in the presence of our silent, profound attention, clients can generate all of the connections, insights, challenges, feelings, plans and actions they want from the session, and all of them often better than the ones we could direct them to, however deftly?

Could we notice that all of this can happen even if we say nothing, other than to ask, ‘What do you want to think about?’ And then, only if needed, ‘What more do you think, or feel, or want to say?’

Could we offer our clients and ourselves the opportunity to see how brilliantly they can think -- because of our rich and radiant silence?

Given the prevalent assumption that we add value as coaches by what we say, this silence and its simple questions can be a slippery challenge for almost all of us. But we can quickly get our footing.

Adelle, the coach, asked Chris, her client, ‘What would you like to think about, and what are your thoughts?’

Chris said, ‘I want to think about peace.’ He paused. They were silent. Fifteen seconds passed. Adelle already wanted to speak. She wondered why he was not planning to talk about his leadership as agreed. But she decided to trust her attention as a catalyst.

‘ – mine, he said, I want to think about *my* peace. I want to find it.’

He paused again. He looked at Adelle. He continued. ‘I am tired of driving – inside. I admire people with inner authority, with stillness somewhere. Yes, stillness. That is what I want.

‘Instead, I dart around, even when I am sitting. Most of the time most of me is somewhere else, accelerating, swerving. What is this about?’

Neither spoke. Chris looked out across the room and into somewhere not known to either of them.

Adelle knew what he needed. She already had three insights, a gorgeous question and two models, any of which she knew could be useful to him. But she maintained her interest in Chris's mind at work and settled down inside.

A half-minute passed. 'The thing is,' Chris said, 'that when I decide to be peaceful in this one second, I love it; and I can hold onto that for a few more seconds, maybe five. But if anyone speaks, I focus on what they think of me. So, I start driving and swerving again.'

He paused, looked down. And then he said, 'I think that is all.'

Adelle asked slowly, 'What more do you think, or feel, or want to say?'

Chris said, quietly, 'I keep getting bonuses. But there are no bonuses for peace. Business loves drivers. Dad knew that. When I received my MBA, he hugged me and then said, 'Son, it's your drive; get to know it.' I was never quite sure what he meant. I was sure, though, that he was proud of me, and I became my drive.'

He looked far away. Adelle's stayed interested, and silent.

Then Chris turned back to Adelle. 'So, what do you make of this anyway?' he said.

Adelle almost spoke, but didn't.

'Actually,' he said, 'It is simple. I want peace. Even if there are no bonuses ever again.'

'Do you think I am capable of this?' he asked Adelle. She prepared to answer but stayed attentive another two seconds.

'No,' Chris said, 'that's not the point. All that matters is the five seconds of peace I have known. I want more seconds like those. Even five more. And maybe someday, five hundred more. And I clearly am capable of that.'

'So... I hereby decide that twice a day I will be peaceful for five seconds longer than the day before --- and see whether anyone dies.'

He frowned. 'But maybe it would be better' he said, 'to start this next month. Maybe now is not quite the right time to start being peaceful.'

Not even raising an eyebrow, Adelle stayed interested in where his thinking would go next.

Chris looked away. Many seconds passed. Then he said, ‘That is really stupid. Every “now” will be just like this “now”, full of “not-yets”. So --- I am going to do this in the only “now” I will ever have.’

He smiled. ‘Thank you,’ he said, ‘five seconds at a time. I’ll let you know. Or maybe I won’t. Maybe I won’t remember to, because it will just be who I am.’

Chris went home and started his five-seconds-at-a-time plan, and kept it up.

Six months later he cancelled a trip to France to be at the bedside of his father whose emergency surgery had hospitalised him. When Chris arrived, his dad was sleeping. Chris moved quietly into the chair next to the bed. He sat, looking at his dad, sending love, wondering how long he had.

His dad slowly opened his eyes. He looked around the room, and then saw Chris, and smiled. Chris smiled back. Neither spoke. His dad looked away. Chris kept looking at his dad, but didn’t speak. His dad looked again, and kept looking.

Then his dad said, ‘It is your serenity. It’s good. I see you finally got to know your drive. It was no friend, was it, Son? I am glad.’ And he fell back asleep.

Chris says he thinks about his father’s words almost everyday. ‘It’s my peace he wanted for me all along.’

Chris’s peace had begun in the coach’s fecund silence. In that silence it was Chris who had thought of his goal of peace; he’d developed it; he’d found and removed the blocks to it. The coach produced that result with her silence, and with only once the question: ‘What more do you think, or feel, or want to say?’

She could have, and would have, intervened differently if she had had to. But she didn’t. He was able to do it for himself, better than she could have for him, because of her quiet.

What happened in that silence? Ignition. Creation. Gestation. Birth. Exactly the purpose of coaching. So why do we so often prevent it? Why is it still common practice for coaches to listen only to reply? Why is listening to ignite so rare?

What is it about generative silence we don’t understand, that we struggle to honour?

I wonder sometimes if we are afraid of silence, our own and our client’s. And I wonder if this fear may come from being taught that the client’s silence signals the end of their thinking and a need to be rescued -- and so we have learned that our silence is the crumbling of our expertise.

We are not usually taught that because of our silence, clients are working, they are thinking, they are changing.

Have we been taught to be afraid of the still water?

Of course we are right to be afraid of manipulative silence, of prurient silence, of disconnected silence, of the silence of seduction.

But the silence that produces breakthroughs in human thinking is none of these. It is a silence born of attention so profound it produces new life. It is a silence emerging from awe, as Richard Feynman said, at the ‘inconceivable nature of nature’, at nature’s greatest of all shimmering creations, the human mind in front of us.

We can decide to provide this silence, this attention, as our key expertise. We can then watch the client’s thinking soar when our attention is warm and alive, and not transgressed.

So, technically, what does happen in the coach’s silence? Possibly two things:

One may be that, our Attention, our quiet, stimulates a particular, inherent sequence of questions in the mind of the client. This sequence of questions builds to what I call an Incisive Question and moves the client from block to breakthrough so fast we can hardly see it. But working backwards from the breakthrough, we can.

We can start at the end by noticing the breakthrough idea. We can then wonder retrospectively, ‘if the breakthrough was the answer, what was the question? And if that was the question, what was the answer to the question before that, and what was that answer’s question, and so on. We finally end at the beginning, and we turn and see this sequence stretching out before us.

This sequence of questions, seems to be roughly, but magnificently, this:

1. What do you want to achieve here?
2. What are you assuming that is stopping you from achieving this?
3. What else are you assuming that is stopping you from achieving this? What else? What else?
4. Of those assumptions, or any that might spring to mind, what are you assuming that is most stopping you from achieving this goal?
5. Do you think that assumption is true?
6. If it is, what are you assuming that is causing that assumption to stop you from achieving this goal?
7. Do you think that assumption is true?
8. If it is not true, what are your words for what is true and liberating instead?
9. If you knew that, how would you achieve this goal?

Generative silence seems to produce those questions and their answers.

The mind seems to recognise the key block is an untrue limiting assumption lived as true. This silent sequence of questions finds and removes that assumption and replaces it with an exquisite true liberating one, connects it to the goal, and the breakthrough begins. All of that seemed to happen in Chris's mind during Allele's silence. The other thing that seems to happen in the silence is explained by neuroscience.

In conversations with Professor Paul Brown, from whom some of you will today be privileged to learn, too, I have begun to understand the possible neuroscience of the Thinking Environment. Dr Brown, after experiencing the Thinking Session coaching process, said to me, 'I think I know why this works. I think this quality of attention and its generative silence calm the amygdala, open the limbic system, and hold it open by *keeping* the amygdala calm, so that the brain can rearrange the architecture of the client's life (both neurologically, and metaphorically).

'It is I think the quality of the attention, of the silence,' he continued, 'that allows for this calming, and this sustained opening. It is not that as therapists and coaches we have never done this,' he said; 'we have, of course; but haphazardly; whereas in this process, it happens every time. But typically when we have achieved this opening, we have often closed it by coming in too soon, by trying to be clever,' he said.

The neuroscience also suggests that when a person is in the presence of this guaranteed quality of attention, 'approach' hormones such as serotonin, endorphins and oxytocin bathe the cortex, so that it can do its particularly human kind of thinking, maintaining a productive relationship with the limbic system.

On the other hand, if this seamless attention is shattered by interruption or intervention, 'avoid' hormones such as adrenalin and cortisol can begin to bathe the cortex, and thinking can slow down. In effect, when we come in too soon, we can extinguish fresh, even brilliant, independent thinking, the very purpose of coaching.

It seems, then, that the 'magic' of generative attention and silence is actually a comprehensible, no-tricks-at-all, chemical event. We experience it as 'trust'.

Think about what beauties we could spawn in our world if we could see how simple it is to ignite new dimensions of the immense, waiting-in-the-wings intelligence of our clients.

And in these times of change in which revolutions are conducted through Tweets of 140 characters, when we can hold 10,000 books in one hand, and hold seminars for 1000 people in our sitting room, when we can almost simultaneously text, email, bid on ebay, post on our wall, and attend a conference as an avatar, we need as a species to be thinking for ourselves at unprecedented levels of clarity, integrity and imagination. And this will require conversations of all sorts, especially coaching conversations, in which generative silence, with continuous full attention, is the norm.

But this urge to regard the coach as the one whose thinking and speaking matters most has tentacles. One man said to me after watching a Thinking Session coaching demonstration: 'I am sitting here, Nancy, and I am

watching it work, watching it work, marvelling, and watching it work. And yet, I can feel my body revving up, needing to do something, anything!

Another person countered by saying, ‘But actually, Nancy, it is not that you are not doing anything; it is that you are not saying anything.’

And on a different occasion, a woman said to her tutor after a demonstration of a Thinking Environment-based session, ‘In that demonstration the client worked right through a complex business issue she had struggled with for six months. In my book, that is great coaching.’

‘But if in my assessment I were to coach in that way, you would fail me, because in that demonstration just now, the coach did not speak for 28 minutes. You will assess me by what *I* say, not by what the *client* says; How do you connect those dots?’

And often people ask, in a kind of quiet panic, ‘But if we grow to understand and practice the generative power of silence, will we ever speak? Will we ever use all our other wonderful expertise?’

Yes. But later. Maybe much later. Possibly only after we know for sure that our attention and silence, and those few, elegant, natural questions, have done all they can. And that requires us to be happy to leave unuttered, if necessary, all of our inimitable words.

This silence is simple. But it is, in the words of Oliver Johnston, ‘the kind of simplicity that is to be found on the far side of complexity’. And it is our estrangement from the complexity that can, in the silence, take us by the throat and make us speak.

But it needn’t. The simplicity of silence, complete with all its complexity, is as natural as can be. It is all around us. It is ours for the learning. We just need to see silence for what it is: the source of new thinking.

Probably all of us have had the kind of moment when someone, not necessarily a professional, just a person with an unsullied, integrated understanding of what humans need, is present with us, is silent; and we change.

My mother died when I was 38. Afterwards I travelled 2000 miles every two months from Washington to New Mexico to visit my dad. He and mother had loved each other for 60 years. He was in a kind of pain I could barely fathom. I knew he also was attempting, even to his now adult children, to be both mother and father. I knew he felt he didn’t know how to do that.

I decided, though, that on the next visit I had to tell him the truth, something I had been putting off since before Mother died. I had to tell him because my life was changing, and because lying to him had become harder than facing his anger at hearing the truth.

What I needed to tell him also flew hard against a lot of his upbringing.

When I arrived, I spent the first day talking about everything else. And the second day. And the third. Then that night, before I would leave at dawn the next day, I knew I had to open my mouth and say the words that would keep me from turning back.

‘Dad,’ I said, ‘I need to tell you something.’

He looked alarmed. My heart made crazed noises as if trying to nail me to the sofa and block out all the words that would now have to follow. But I got up and went to the chair next to him.

‘What is it, honey?’ he said, his face concerned. I already read criticism, and I had not even begun.

‘Peter and I are getting a divorce,’ I said. ‘We have been living apart for two years.’

He lit a cigarette. He was shaking. Then he lit another cigarette. He did not seem confused by that. I thought maybe he had lit the second one for mother.

He looked at me. He was silent.

I took a breath. ‘I have fallen in love with a man who lives in England,’ I said. (I hoped his reverence for Churchill would help out here.)

‘He is Christopher,’ I said, ‘and I have finally found happiness.’ Immediately I heard how ‘Hallmark’ that sounded, and wished I could start again.

I began to cry. He began to cry. But he kept listening.

Knowing I was losing traction, I lunged into the next sentence. ‘For twenty years,’ I said, ‘Christopher was in an intimate relationship with a man. Christopher and I are in love. We don’t know where our relationship will go; but I know this is the relationship of my life.’

There. It was all out. I didn’t move. I ignored the tissue in my pocket, not wanting to clear the tears for fear of seeing his anger.

He didn’t speak. Slowly he put out both cigarettes. He wiped his own tears. He looked down. And then he looked into my eyes.

Carefully, deliberately, he said, ‘Nancy, as long as there is a breath of life left in my body, ---- I will love you.’

The seconds that followed were big enough to fill the universe. I look back now and know that through his silence he had generated new life for us both.

What happened inside his silence? My dignity; my courage; my coming home; my thinking; my reclaiming myself; his respect; his finding his knowing beyond his knowing; and the beginning of a grownup relationship between us. Generative silence can do even that.

But his attention and its silence took courage. They do. They take courage to trust the intelligence unfolding in front of us. And they take courage to source our own best self in response.

I began this morning by proposing that we start over. There are many good reasons to do this.

But the best reason for starting over as coaches is that every time with our clients, is the first time, every minute is the first minute. When they begin to think for themselves, they are different people every second, and we must run to keep up, not lasso them from behind and drag them back to us.

Our clients, made more intelligent through our silence, through our attention long, I think, for us to bring into being what may be the real art of coaching. They long, I think, for us to start over by remembering that:

We can make our minds so like still water
That beings gather about us,
That they may see, it may be,
Their own images;
And so, live for a moment,
With a clearer, perhaps even with a fiercer life,
Because of our quiet.