**We are the stories we tell: working with written narrative in coaching**

By Carole Pemberton

**The Importance of Narrative**

In his autobiography, Jean Paul Sartre wrote “We see our lives through the stories we tell”. He could have added that we live our lives according to the stories we tell ourselves. Those stories shape our self-concept, the possibilities we allow ourselves, and our creation of the emerging future. As coaches we know that our clients often appear when their self-narrative has been disrupted: they are not the leader they thought they would be; their successful career is not giving the satisfaction that they believed it would; they discover that they can fail.

The stories our clients bring deserve respectful attention, not in order to establish their objective truth, but to understand their truth for the client. We are curious about the sort of story they are telling themselves, how long they have told that story and the identity they hold within it. We are often the privileged audience for client stories that have never previously been verbalised, but sit finely honed inside their head. Our role is to help our client reflect on that story in a new way, so that understanding can be deepened and a new, more useful story can be constructed.

Narrative coaches such as David Drake (2007) have spoken of the third space that is created when the client brings their story to a listener who gives them a quality of attention that is not normally available. In having that receptive audience, the author is encouraged to explore issues related to their identity, their purpose within the story, and the reasons for the story playing out in a particular way. In doing so they recognise that they are their own editor and can craft a new narrative.

**Written Narrative to Support Reflection**

In the valuing of the co-creation of a new narrative within a coaching relationship, less attention has been paid to the particular place that writing can have for the coachee. While narrative tools such as inviting clients to construct a life-line, write a future obituary or completing a wheel of life are well established within life and career coaching, those tools are ones that the coach has created as a means of structuring thought. Coaching has placed less value on the client’s own writing as part of supporting their reflective process and enabling change.

I came to the realisation of the value of writing within the coaching process through the work of James Pennebaker (1997). Pennebaker, writing as a psychologist within a medical university, discovered that the process of free writing about events, which had emotional meaning for an individual, resulted in measurable changes in immune system functioning, leading to fewer visits to doctors. In repeated studies, he has shown that written confession is good for the body and that it offers more than improved health when dealing with life difficulties. Writing also supports the processing of difficult events. It allows people to express what may be held back in conversation, even with a trusted coach. Without self-censorship, the writer is able to download internalised thoughts and in the process of doing so create a distance which allows for new reflections and insights. In the process of writing repeatedly about an event, the language related to it changes as the individual’s relationship with that story shifts.



**Using the Clients Narrative**

Given the potential value of written expression as part of the coaching process, how can we encourage clients to engage in reflective writing, without them feeling that it is being judged for its literary merit, since many individuals, regardless of seniority or talent, lack confidence in their writing skills? It requires that the coach offers rather than demands writing, in the same way as any experiment within the coaching conversation is an invitation. However, the coachee’s willingness to engage is helped by:

* Explaining the value that writing can have as part of the process of change
* Highlighting that frequency of writing is more important than length
* Ensuring they understand that the writing is for their benefit, as a means of encouraging them to stop and take stock of where they are in relation to their coaching focus.  It is not work to be submitted for  assessment by the coach
* Positioning the writing as their property, it is for them to decide what they share
* Offering them a journal to record their thoughts – so that it is seen as something separate from their work role
* Inviting them at the beginning of a coaching session to share anything they choose from their journal
* Building a five-minute slot into each coaching session where they write, without lifting their pen from the paper, their thoughts and feelings that day and then inviting them to share any new thoughts that have emerged
* At the end of the coaching relationship, inviting them to write an account of how they now see themselves in relation to their coaching focus, as part of their evaluation of the process, and to reinforce the change.

**References:**

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American Psychological Society, 8,3,162-166.

***Carole Pemberton****is Director of Coaching to Solutions and Visiting Professor in Coaching at the University of Ulster Business School.  She used written narrative as part of her DProf study on coaching individuals back to resilience, and uses it regularly within her coaching practice.   She regularly holds narrative coaching skills workshops.  The next is due in Autumn 2013.*