



Appreciating the Story

As coaches we listen to our clients' stories. We are trained to stand as witness or observer to our clients' experiences without ourselves becoming enmeshed or "hooked by" the stories they tell us. Our service is to be the compassionate observer, seeing beyond the story into how the emotions underlying the storytelling can inform where our client may be in their present development and perhaps give us clues as to how our inquiry may create a new possibility for them.

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When we are trained as coaches we are cautioned not to "buy into" the story in order to maintain this outsider status that allows us to be at service. It is when that outsider status becomes an evaluator about the story that coaches become judgmental. Instead of listening with compassion for the nuggets in the story, the coach judges the story and labels it. "Don't get hooked by the story" becomes an assessment of the very value of the story and its underlying human message. "You are not your story" may be true and so is "My story is part of my emotional make-up and knowing my story can help me choose what parts of it I want to keep playing out and what parts of it I choose to release."

"This kind of forgetting does not erase memory, it lays the emotion surrounding the memory to rest."

~ Clarissa Pinkola Estes

The proficient coach does not sit in judgment of the stories a client tells, Indeed, the masterful coach empathizes with the story and approaches the story with appreciation of the texture, the flavor, the grief or joy inherent in the story. It is a reflection of the client's inner landscape expressed in an ancient way that may be the only access to the deep underpinnings of what drives a

human being. The stories we tell are powerful reminders of who we are and how we got to be the way we are. They most certainly inform who we may be in the future although they may not determine that outcome because, after all, we are at choice about what we do with our stories.

The danger for the coach lies in becoming confused between "getting hooked by the story" and dismissing the story altogether or labeling the story as blatantly limiting for the client and an absolute predictor of the clients ability to reach their desired future. That assessment assumes that the client is incapable of or unwilling to choose a future alternative. We do not get to sit in judgment of anyone's stories. We are privileged indeed to share in the most intimate of stories and with that gift comes a responsibility

to remain open in the space of pain, grief, joy, fear, confusion and all the muck that makes us human.

Stories are humanity expressed in color. Stories not only describe an experience, they evoke a reflection of our own experience as part of a collective human experience. How often have you seen your own stories reflected in a client conversation? I for one will admit to countless times.

I do not mean to suggest that we should coach the story instead of the individual. We should however never judge the story and from a place of non-attachment and appreciation, observe both the story and the storyteller and look for the connections between the two. Courageous coaches remain centered in stillness as a client tells his or her story, fluid in the tsunami of emotions that may rise from the act of telling their story. From that place of calm, the eye in the storm, the richness of a story becomes clear and as compassionate observer we may indeed then be in a position to assist the client to gain clarity as well.

"Ideas are clean. They soar in the supernal. I can take them out and look at them. They fit in a book. They lead me down that narrow way. And in the morning, they are there. Ideas are straight. But the world is round and a messy mortal is my friend. Come walk with me in the mud."

~ Hugh Prather, Notes to Myself

It is too easy to dismiss stories. For new coaches who are relying on technical competency and being trained not to get "hooked" by the story or for coaches that may need to be reminded that not being hooked is not the same as dismissing or judging the story our client tells us this is a powerful distinction that is not often made explicit. When I enter into the client's story my intuition and senses are the tools I enlist to be present. Judgment lives in the intellect and that is what I set aside while I am present to the story. As an advocate for developing intuition, this method and its results provide a compelling case for the nurturing of the intuition. I can feel and taste and sense all of the elements of the story yet remain still and non-attached at the same time. This ability takes practice and attention to develop as it may appear at first to be a paradox or mutually exclusive.

"I hope you go out and let stories happen to you, and that you will work them, water them with your blood and tears and your laughter till they bloom, till you yourself burst into bloom."

~Clarissa Pinkola Estes

We are each the Chief Storyteller of our lives. As humans our stories are precious to us. They help us understand ourselves and how we fit into our world. They remind us of what we really care about, even if it is buried somewhere in our story. Love the stories you tell. Love the stories our clients tell us. There is healing in storytelling.

As we help our clients move from “a dark and stormy night” to perhaps “living happily ever after”, we may all learn that I can change the endings of my stories, I can do re-writes and ultimately, I can choose to be the author of the most important story – my own.



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