

The Conscious Coach as Midwife

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Coaching for transformation requires a new skill set guided by new metaphors. As coaches, we know the power of metaphor to invoke change in the service of our coachees. I wonder what metaphors would best describe our work and roles as coaches? I am part of a coaching community of practice that is exploring alternative metaphors for coaches, mostly working in spaces of racial and gender justice in corporate and community contexts. This article is both a conceptual and community of practice reflection and an invitation to other coaching communities to amplify our exploration of metaphors for socially conscious coaching.

Traditional metaphors of coaching include coach as thinking partner, facilitator, healer, guide, mentor. In all of these metaphors, there is an implicit 'power over' relationship, where the coach becomes the more knowledgeable, experienced, and responsible one inadvertently. However, we know as coaches that we are partners to our coachees and recognise that the real work is the work of the coachee and less ours. In this context are there different metaphors that better describe the work and the role of the coach that embodies this genuine partnership, where each party has something valuable, diverse, and necessary for the transformational process.

Our choice of metaphors becomes especially important when we navigate new conversational spaces that business and leadership coaching has traditionally avoided. These topics include conversations of power dynamics about race and gender as manifest in racism and patriarchy. In adopting a feminist lens to organisational coaching, we recognise the real issues people of colour and women are dealing with is less about technical and leadership competence, it is about navigating social and institutional systems set up to advantage one group over the other.

As a coaching community of practice with mostly White female coaches working with mostly Black African female clients, we engaged in a series of conversations about our coaching relevance especially on the back of **#Black Lives Matter**. What is the role of coaching and coaches as agents of social change? Do we continue to serve White male corporate capitalism or adopt a bolder, ethical, and socially responsive approach to our work as coaches? In this light, as a community of practice, we explored the metaphor of the coach as a midwife as one potentially powerful metaphor that helps us as transformative coaches to reframe what we are about and the responsibility attached to this new way of seeing.

Elena Aguilar in Search of a Metaphor for Coaching (2014)¹ identified three coaching metaphors recognising that they did not adequately capture coaching as a partnership. The first metaphor is of a **farmer** who cultivates effective teachers and leaders. I think of how attentive farmers must be to weather systems and soil quality and the context in which plants grow. As a coach, I have to be aware of the systems that impact my client. I need to be conscious of the context in which they're working, of their own "ripeness" or "readiness" to grow. Farmers also have to have exceptional patience, letting the plants grow in their time, and the ability to let control and trust the process.

The second metaphor is that of a **chiropractor** who is paying attention to body misalignment and pressure points. She says, as a coach, I feel like my role is to help a client find those spots where they're out of alignment. And relieve pain points in asking the right questions. Sometimes to professionally develop and become empowered, we need a little adjustment and healing.

Finally, the third metaphor that resonates with her is that a coach is like a **tour guide**. A tour jointly planned and undertaken together. On this journey together, as a coach, I may know at times that will help the client, but I also have tools and resources, encouragement, and feedback that might help the client be more effective. I often feel like when I meet a new client we're about to embark on a significant, life-changing trip together.

As much as these metaphors resonate with Aguilla, she has doubts about them saying "I worry that they place too much of the action of coaching on the coach. To me, coaching is a partnership that only works if both parties are equally engaged.

At the International Coach Federation European Conference in Italy, **Robert Dilts ran a seminal session titled 'From Coach to Awakener'**.² He stated that coaching is the process of helping another person perform at the peak of his or her abilities. It doesn't assume people are broken and need fixing. On the contrary, it helps them identify and develop their strengths. It starts from the assumption that people have the answers and that the coach's role is to help

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https://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/coaching_teachers/2014/07/what_is_a_coachs_role.htm

2 Suzanna Prout (2013).The six roles of an Executive Coach (2013)

<https://www.xenonex.co.uk/executive-coaching-blog/the-six-roles-of-an-executive-coach-leeds-leadership-development/>

that person to overcome internal resistances and interferences, give feedback on behaviour, and give tips and guidance. But Dilt added that a coach plays five other roles:

Guiding and Caretaking: Guiding is the process of directing another person along the path leading from where they are present to where they want to be, providing a safe and supportive environment without unnecessary distractions or interferences from the outside.

Teaching; Teaching relates to helping a person develop cognitive skills and capabilities, and the emphasis is on learning. It focuses on the acquisition of general skills, rather than on performance in specific situations. A teacher helps a person to develop new strategies for thinking and acting.

Mentoring; A teacher instructs, while a coach provides specific behavioural feedback, to help a person learn or grow. Mentors, on the other hand, guide us to discover our unconscious competences and strengthen beliefs and values, often through their example.

Sponsorship; Sponsorship involves creating a context in which others can act, grow, and excel. Sponsorship is about the development of identity and core values, awakening, and safeguarding potential within others. It involves the commitment to the promotion of something that is already within a person or group, but which may not be manifest in its fullest capacity.

Awakening; Awakening goes beyond coaching, teaching, mentoring, and sponsorship to include the level of vision, mission, and spirit. An awakener puts other people in touch with their missions and visions, and thus the coach needs to know his/her vision and mission and purpose.

This last role of 'awakening' moves beyond the traditional competency model of coaching into a space that is not easily defined, which requires intuitive presence and deep trust between coach and coachee. There is an element of risk, unpredictability and I dare say adventure in the coaching relationship. This metaphor for coaching offers more generative opportunities for diverse and more in-depth coaching conversations.

Coach as Midwife

As a coaching community of practice, we embraced and explored what coaching as midwife means for us both conceptually and in practice. We thought we were novel in our metaphor only to discover that Socrates first introduced the metaphor of midwife in describing the philosophical awakening he engaged in with his fellow male Athenians. He was helping them

give birth to the wisdom that is in them. He says it thus, in *The Theaetetus*, 150 b-c

"My art of midwifery is in general like theirs [real midwives]; the only difference is that my patients are men, not women, and my concern is not with the body but with the soul that is in travail of birth. And the highest point of my art is the power to prove by every test whether the offspring of a young man's thought is a false phantom or instinct with life and truth. I am so far like the midwife that I can, not myself give birth to wisdom, and the common reproach is true, that, though I question others, I can myself bring nothing to light because there is no wisdom in me...The many admirable truths they bring to birth have been discovered by themselves from within. But the delivery is heaven's work and mine."

Sadly, Socrates also was constrained by his patriarchal mindset in describing his role as a superior midwife dealing with the seemingly unintelligent men of Athens. Despite this limitation, the midwife as a metaphor aptly captures the complexity, power, and richness of the dynamic relationship between coach and coachee. The midwife metaphor is captured well by a woman reflecting on the role of midwife her life³:

"I've been extremely fortunate to have highly skilled midwives attend all three of my births. My life and the lives of my children depended on their watchfulness, decision-making and care. They were not in control of my birthing processes but were able to use their resourcefulness, intelligence and compassion to empower me to do what only I could do. Their presence gave me confidence and courage; their quiet voices comforted me deeply. My firstborn son was very literally rescued from death by my midwife's actions. Another midwife was present through one of the longest and most painful nights of my life as I labored with my daughter; when she was born my midwife laid her on my chest, sharing deeply in my joy and my relief. In my third (and most peaceful) birth a few months ago, it wasn't until I saw pictures that I realised how closely involved my midwife was throughout the process, how much I needed her quiet hands in my most vulnerable moments."

Maryellen Weimer (2010)⁴ picks up the midwife as a **Metaphor for Teaching**. Her description of the teacher as a midwife offers valuable insights into our exploration of the coach as a midwife. I have paraphrased her description interchanging teacher with the coach. The coach-

³ <http://adrielbooker.com/motherheart-of-god-midwife/>

⁴ <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/philosophy-of-teaching/metaphor-for-teaching-the-teacher-as-midwife/>

midwife is there at the birth of insight. She has attended many other births, been with many other coachees as they have gone through the arduous process of change. *It is a joyful, exciting event, but not without pain*—sometimes the pain is long and intense, causing the coachee to despair and lose hope. But the coach-midwife understands. She knows that sometimes progress is slow. She also knows how much more pain lies ahead and what the coachee might try to ease the discomfort and expedite the process. The coach-midwife offers encouragement; her presence is reassuring.

Although most births are similar, no two are identical, in the same way, that coachees *change journey follows patterns but is always unique. Sometimes problems arise*. The coach-midwife knows what to do. She is prepared, not with a script, but with knowledge, a wealth of previous experience, generative questions, and resources she can summon. It is when problems emerge that the midwife's presence is most needed and appreciated.

The birthing event joins midwife and mother in a shared quest. Midwives are not the ones giving birth any more than coaches are there to do the work for their coachees. What the coachee is struggling to learn the coach may already know. *But midwives still struggle*. They strive to figure out the best way to help, support, guide and encourage the mother. Birth and learning require both coach and mother to expend effort. They work together, but they tackle the problem in different ways. When the insight and change do finally arrive, credit for having given birth goes to the coachee. Just like the midwife's, the coach's job now is to share the joy and wonder.

Weimer's description of the teacher and by extension coach as midwife invokes a different language set. This language is less about performance, effectiveness, efficiency, targets, alignment, and achievements. Her language evokes a raw human experience described as one of pain, unpredictability, patience, unforeseen problems, trauma, joy, and wonder. This metaphoric expression invites a different paradigm for coaching practice. It also invites coaches to prepare themselves for a different calling that is more sacred, powerful, and potentially transformative.

The Midwife Metaphor for Coaching Consciousness on Race & Gender

The ancient story of the Israelites in bondage as slaves in Egypt provides a poignant backdrop to the role of the coach as a midwife in a complicated and dangerous context. When the Pharaoh ordered the killing of male Israelite children, it was midwives that were responsible for executing the task. Yet amongst this group of midwives, there were many courageous

conviction that dared to disobey the Pharaoh and bring the new life of Israelite male children into an oppressive contextⁱ. What would spur both the Midianite and Egyptian midwives to do this? I am especially intrigued by the Egyptian midwives bringing prohibited children of another race into being. This exemplifies for me, the calling of the coach as a midwife that is both courageous but also committed to conducting their work in a very volatile racist context. The disobedient midwives were not just delivering 'their own' but availing themselves for the cross-race/cultural work of conscious birthing.

Coaching Community of Practice Reflections

The community of coaching practice (COP) which I was a part of, engaged in a series of masterclasses focused on coaching capacity building. Over the year, the focus has been on coaching in a social context addressing the more difficult issues of race, gender, power and patriarchy. In our last conversation, we explored emerging metaphors for a new paradigm of coaching with particular focus on the midwife as a relevant metaphor for coaching.

The demographics of our COP may have also found particular resonance with the midwife metaphor, being mostly women, five Black and five White. Most of the COP clients are of different race identity, which amplifies the need for conscious engagement on race and gender as critical variables in the coaching context. The following notes are reflective of our coaching conversation, which may provide a window for how other coaching communities may consider the role of race and gender especially in the context of South Africa's race and patriarchy. The premise of our conversation asked how coaching and coaches can be an agent for social change. We explored what the metaphor means for us; what are the implications for coaching practice and finally what capacity building is needed to enable competence, confidence and compassion in this difficult space of race, gender, power and patriarchy.

Conceptual Meaning of the Midwife Metaphor

In our coaching community of practice, the following conceptual themes emerged in our exploration of the coach as midwife metaphor:

- Bringing a new life is a beautiful and precious process
- New birth can be traumatic, messy & uncomfortable
- Coach as an accompaniment – facilitating the conditions for birthing
- Believe in new birth: stretch support, listen and tune in

- Enormous responsibility to be alongside, complicated but beautiful
- Enabling giving birth to ideas

Coaching Practice Implications

We then explored what this might mean for coaching practice:

- Requires a trusting coaching relationship
- To sit with the coachee with whatever pain they are experiencing
- To tune into what they need - trusting intuition and intention
- A balance between pushing and being supportive
- It is an additional coaching capability and leadership consciousness skill
- It is our responsibility to stay with the awareness & discomfort of the process
- Opening up space for courageous conversations to happen
- Calling out and raising awareness on uncomfortable issues
- Understand pain (painful conversation) is necessary for healing (doctor and injection)
- Going with the client into difficult issues (race, gender, power, patriarchy)
- Providing an intentional space to be socially conscious in the coaching ecosystem

Capacity Building for Social Change Coaching

Our last exploration enquired about our development needs as coaches in embracing the midwife as coach metaphor in our practice:

- Creating awareness and equipping us to sit and stay with the difficult conversations
- Becoming competent, so we are comfortable to hold and deepen the conversation
- Working in triads to practice skills, understand how this feels and share feedback
- More conversations with people of colour and hear real-life stories of trauma
- Recognising and dealing with our (White) privilege, fragility, and guilt

Conclusion

In writing this article, I reflect on my identity as an Indian male. The experience of childbirth and midwife are removed from my direct gender-based experience. I recall my mum telling me about my birth with my aunt as her loving and capable midwife. So as a recipient of the love and care of a midwife, I am a testament to this gift in the world. As a male coach, this

metaphor empowers and liberates me to see more deeply how my gender has privileged me and as a Black person also to know the pain of racism in my lifetime in South Africa.

Conscious coaching for social change comes out of consciousness which leads to empowerment and accountability. Coaching in matters of race, gender, power, and patriarchy out of places of guilt, shame and insecurity will not be in the service of our coachees and the work of social justice and transformative coaching. Pain lasts for the night, and joy comes in the morning (Psalm 30:5). This is a poem I wrote a few years ago that captures this experience:

Conflicting Birth

It was a hard birth
So much of pushing
Pushing
Screaming
Pain
Delightful joy arrives
Messy, noisy
Gasping for breath
Conflict gave birth once more
To a beautiful baby, they called
Consciousness

END

July 2020

ⁱ <https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-egyptian-midwives>