

# The spirit of coaching

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What role can spiritual intelligence play in our coaching relationships and practices? **Jackee Holder** demonstrates how we can develop our own spiritual intelligence and use this in our own lives and our work with clients.

In 2002 I was ordained as an interfaith minister and spiritual counsellor. My work in the wider world as an interfaith minister includes creating personalised ceremonies and services in collaboration with couples, communities and individuals, which are spiritually influenced. This could be anything from hosting a baby blessing (one of my favourites), performing a marriage ceremony out in nature or orchestrating a celebration of a significant birthday or rite of passage. This is work that I feel honoured to do, that is spiritually attuned to the people I am working with and brings spirituality into the everyday.

In the first module of my two-year training as an interfaith minister and spiritual counsellor, I was introduced to a powerful invocation of witnessing that originates from the northern Zulu Natal tribe from South Africa. In a room of over 40 people we were asked to stand and quietly centre ourselves without speaking. Then we were instructed to move around the room, taking turns to stand and be with one person at a time in silence and engage in a greeting ritual.

It begins with one person saying aloud to the person they are working with, the words, *Sawubona*, which means, 'I am here to be seen'. Then the other person takes their time in connecting to and really seeing the person they are standing with. This is not an activity to hurry. Once the connection has been made (I believe one feels it in the body and the heart in varying degrees, depending on the connection made), then in their own time they would say out loud to their partner, '*Sikhona*, I am here and I see you'.

When this practice of welcoming the other is done with its original sacred intention, it can be cathartic, catalytic and deeply transformative. Nothing connects us human to human more powerfully than being truly witnessed by another. Such is the therapeutic impact of being truly seen that it has the power to transform many of the malaises and challenges that find their way into our coaching practices and conversations.

As coaches we often re-enact a similar practice of witnessing on a smaller scale in our one-to-one work with our clients. Really witnessing our clients is a way of holding sacred space in the coaching relationship, and as one

senior leader I coached recently said to me at the end of the coaching assignment, 'You make me feel six feet tall'.

Psychosynthesis coach Martha Crampton describes how she makes a spiritual connection in her work: 'I deeply believe that the most important way I can support clients in building their spiritual connection is to connect with their essence myself. This bond is an energetic one. It is a silent appreciation and affirming of who that person is as a being. It invites their essence to come forth and take its place in the world.'<sup>1</sup> Witnessing at its core is a spiritual practice that has enormous potential for creating a safe space in coaching that can and does lead to a deeper, spiritual inquiry into one's inner life.

While there has been plenty of debate about the grey areas between coaching and therapy, the discussions about the more spiritual nature of coaching are less frequently debated on coaching platforms and forums. However, when one examines the range of themes that show up in coaching conversations (ie loss, burnout, grief, relationship issues, challenge, change and transitions), these are often signs and triggers that work of a spiritual nature would enable a more meaningful and resourceful outcome. The increased stresses and strains of modern life and the permanent presence of change in organisational life provide fertile ground for the exploration of spirituality, ceremonies and rituals in our work with clients.

Cindy Wigglesworth, a recognised expert in the field of spiritual intelligence, suggests that coaches can support individuals to develop multiple intelligences including spiritual intelligence.<sup>2</sup> She defines spiritual intelligence as, 'The ability to behave with wisdom and compassion, while maintaining inner and outer peace, regardless of the situation.' She continues by saying how, 'Spiritual intelligence is an essential component of both personal and professional development. With spiritual IQ we access the voice of our noblest self, our highest self.'<sup>3</sup>

Maslow also included spiritual intelligence beyond self-actualisation in his model, the Hierarchy of Needs<sup>4</sup>. Zohar and Marshall speak of the need for working with spiritual intelligence and write, 'We are left with existential or spiritual

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problems, and with the need to cultivate a kind of intelligence that can deal with them. Mere IQ or rational intelligence isn't enough.'<sup>5</sup> Coaches require the skill and flexibility of working with spiritual intelligence to work reflexively at the growing edges with the issues top leaders bring to the coaching space.

Different psychological frameworks and therapies can add a lens through which to embody spiritual intelligence in coaching. Where logical thinking and the intellect end in solving problems, spirituality and a spiritual perspective spring to life. Most notably, psychosynthesis and transpersonal psychology, which include the spiritual dimension of the human experience, are therapeutic approaches that speak to the meaning and relevance of spiritual intelligence in coaching.

Recently I experienced a turbulent period in a long-term relationship, which led me into a personal and spiritual crisis of my own. It was a reminder that the ground we believe to be solid and stable can be rocked and dismantled in the blink of an eye. The experience, though on many levels difficult and unsettling, has brought in its wake a reawakening of both my inner and outer worlds and rekindled my interest in a lingering inquiry question I have held for many years, 'What part or role does spirituality play in coaching?'

The spiritual acumen of both my current coach and coach supervisor, who are both cognisant and transparent about their own spiritual identities, has been of tremendous



value and importance at this time of transition and change, bringing permission and skill to engage in provocative questions such as: Who am I? What do I really, really want? What am I learning? Where to next? Time and space in the coaching to explore the spiritual context of my wider personal experience have been essential, valuable, rich and insightful in a number of different ways.

Despite the challenging aspects of the experience, the personal crisis brought in its arrival its own beauty. As a result of the inner inquiry I embarked on, I naturally re-engaged in my relationship with nature and the environment. I returned to a regular schedule of meditation and daily walks. Leaving home at 6am each day I found myself easily and effortlessly resourced by nature and the environment. I embraced more silence and unplugged from social media, which acted as a natural de-stressor.

There's so much I appreciate about my morning walks that feeds my inner spiritual life. I appreciate the morning current of the river Thames and notice the change in the rhythm and flow of the tides as I wander over Chelsea Bridge some mornings. I appreciate stopping for a few moments below the tree I pass most mornings, home to a flock of birds, whose chirping fills the air but who are almost totally invisible to the naked eye. I love and savour the silence of the city where only the buildings and nature speak against the background purr of car engines in the distance.

Another ritual that strengthens the spiritual practice of being in nature includes regular visits to the ancient Turkey oak in my local park. I am drawn to one of her long, outstretched branches, which is strong, robust and sturdy. I stand beneath her awesome limb, sweeping overhead and drink in the energy of strength that radiates from the branch taking in as much of it as I can literally hold. I come home to myself each morning walking through the streets. As the Scottish-American naturalist and writer John Muir said, 'I only went out for a walk and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found was really going in.'<sup>6</sup>

Working with spiritual intelligence can be integrated into your coaching in a number of varying ways, which is both exciting and stretching. One way is to recognise where you have worked or are working with spiritual intelligence and how it shows up in your practice. In my own coaching and supervision practice I have recognised the presence of spirit by recapturing remembered moments of real soul connection with the individuals I am working with; connection that extends beyond words, that exists between the silent spaces of paying exquisite attention and listening, through the language of metaphors, or through the voice and words of a poem or a quote that touches an unreachable place in the other or in myself.

While not every practice will be worked with directly in a coaching session, many can

be worked with outside of the coaching as part of an ongoing spiritual and professional development that individuals invest in, which builds on deepening the connections made in the coaching.

Spiritual practices that have been initiated in my own coaching relationships, either as a coach or as a coachee, have included working with sacred silence, mindfulness, sharing, reading or reciting poetry aloud, walking meditations, contemplative and reflective writing, recreating past rituals and personal ceremonies, often as rites of passage, holding a stone or object from nature and sharing a prayer or blessing, with my client's permission.

I have designed the following two practices to help coaches identify moments of working with spiritual intelligence in their coaching practices. You will need a notebook and pen or a digital device for your writing entry. Or you may wish to sit and reflect quietly about your responses to both.

#### **Spiritual intelligence practice 1**

Take a moment to centre and relax. Call to mind a moment from a coaching relationship where you really felt aligned, purposeful and connected as a coach and/or with the person you were working with. Now use the prompts below to explore the experience further through writing, reflective or quiet contemplation:

- What was happening and what were you experiencing and noticing in your body?
- What contributed or enabled you to express these qualities?
- What was the evidence in your mind that your work or experience was of a spiritual nature? Allow yourself to identify both tangible and intangible evidence.
- What qualities, energies or skills were you bringing to the conversation or connection?
- What were the energy and presence like within you and between you both?
- What was it like reflecting on the experience in writing or thinking?
- What did it highlight about your relationship with spirituality?
- How might you build on what you are noticing and sensing? →

### Spiritual intelligence practice 2

This second inquiry is an exploration into your personal strengths and qualities as a coach and how these qualities individually and collectively contribute to strengthening your spiritual intelligence muscles.

Find a quiet moment to take time out to respond to the following prompts in a notebook or on a computer:

- What are your visible and hidden strengths in your work as a coach?
- What inspires you and lights you up as a coach?
- What would people you work with in coaching say inspires or lights you up, and why?
- What does your 'best self' look and feel like when coaching?
- What are your unique skills and talents?
- What are your dreams and visions for your future coaching practice?
- What are the great things your clients appreciate you for?
- What do you appreciate and value about who you are as a coach?
- What spiritual tools, practices, rituals or ceremonies have supported you during difficult or challenging times? How have they helped?
- What is this inquiry into your personal qualities saying about your own relationship with spirituality?

Rituals and ceremonies are vital portals into keeping the spiritual aspects of our inner worlds alive. Reconnecting to personalised rituals can offer opportunities for individuals working with complexity and change to access generative answers to what makes meaning and provides purpose in their own lives.

Here are two case studies giving examples of ways I have worked in a more spiritual way as a coach:

### Case study 1

The sudden and unexpected death of a former client's partner was worked with over a series of coaching sessions, using the tools of therapeutic and expressive writing. I had worked with the client for several months and we discussed the differences between coaching and therapy and agreed what could be worked with in the coaching. The content of the writing (which remained private and confidential to the client) was deeply personal, including things left unsaid to the deceased partner. The full range of feelings was recorded in writing and verbalised without censorship, giving full witness to the weight and intensity of the grief and other associated emotions. This gave way over time to pockets of hope and possibility, and eventually the shoots of a new life began to take shape.

Over time the tragic circumstances stirred something inside my client and gradually, over the coming weeks and months, my client re-emerged and re-awakened to parts of her soul and spirit that had lain dormant. During her coaching sessions, close attention was paid to her inner life. It was this quality of attention that got her out of bed each morning, even though she was dealing with grief and loss. The divine contradiction was that despite her partner's death she also felt more alive than she had for the longest time. It was the classic archetype story of transformation, the Phoenix rising from the ashes, resulting in a literal and energetic rebirth. It also engaged the work of transitions and how to navigate a way through an ending to new beginnings.

With a sense of new meaning and purpose to her life my client made changes at work, made new choices and decisions about what she wanted from this life in the future, cleared her home of clutter, met a new partner and they started living together as they worked on finding a new home.

### Case study 2

Mark came to coaching from the finance sector as part of a six-month leadership programme. He was self-aware, had invested in a number of personal development training programmes and was a passionate reader of non-fiction books. He had experienced coaching before and had gone through 18 months of couples' therapy when his long-term relationship broke down. Mark was surprised by the intensity of feelings that had surfaced since the relationship had ended.

Eight months on, his feelings about the break-up remained raw and tender. Even though things were going well at work, Mark felt as if something was still amiss that had nothing to do with his external achievements there. Our work began with an inner exploration of Mark's feelings and emotions through a series of therapeutic expressive writing exercises. Mark identified the practices and rituals that made him feel good and gave him energy. He worked out a way of adding more of these practices to his daily schedule.

By exploring his personal definition of spirituality, Mark was able to realign his important core values and become clearer about how he could sustain and create personal meaning and purpose from his new life now he was single again.

We discussed the option of Mark returning to therapy, but he felt strongly that this was not what he needed; instead, he expressed a desire to stay with his sadness and grief as long as it did not become a barrier or get in the way of his contribution and performance at work. Eventually through the intimacy of exploring his personal feelings and emotions in the privacy of his notebook, Mark decided that he wanted to create an ending ritual to say goodbye to his relationship, to close the door and create the possibility of a new loving relationship in the future. This connection to ritual was also highlighted as a parallel

process in his workplace, as a restructuring had meant his team had been dismantled, around which there were feelings of abandonment, loss and sadness.

By exploring the nature of his own inner life, Mark was able to extend the theme of a ritual to his work life in a meaningful and pragmatic way. He decided that one of the ways he would mark saying goodbye to his team was to buy each team member a book that he personally chose that reflected a part of them he wanted to acknowledge, along with a blank notebook with a message inviting them to write out a vision highlighting the next chapter of their career journey or story.

Mark also created his own personal ritual. He wrote his ex-partner a long letter (that he did not send) outlining all that he loved and appreciated about their time together and all that he missed and regretted about the separation. Mark chose to read the contents to me during one of our sessions. This marked a watershed and indeed a turning point for Mark on his journey. Mark decided the way he would like to release the letter was to ceremoniously burn the letter in his garden. The opportunity to consciously close this chapter in his life in such a personal and meaningful way left Mark feeling lighter and freer than he had in a long time.

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The acknowledgement of spiritual intelligence provides both a language and a map for navigating the deep waters and roots of who we are, along with giving shape and voice to what brings meaning and purpose to our lives. Increasingly, coaching is working beyond the realms of performance coaching and venturing into the world of spirit and soul.

On my own coaching journey the spiritual work that has been and continues to be a part of my journey has been the most transformational and healing work that has touched my core and opened the way to major shifts and transformations. The integration of spiritual practices into coaching is both healing and restorative and a direct route to wholeness and greater wholeheartedness. ■

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