

Oh well, here I am once more sat at the kitchen table writing my coaching journal. Strange how normal this all feels when once upon a time it felt one of the strangest activities on earth. I remember it vividly the day my coach first suggested that I try to do some ‘free writing’ in support of our face to face coaching work. He said that it was something that he and others had found useful, recounting that they found that this writing somehow really solidified the ideas and thoughts that has been floated during the coaching session, and that it also provided an interesting and durable account of that conversation. I could see what he was getting at, but I also felt it was fine for him to say that and believe it. He is probably a skilled writer, while writing is something that I would normally travel a long way to avoid. However, he is nothing if not persistent, my coach, and so it was, just a few months ago, that I first sat here contemplating putting pen to paper. I must say that it all felt quite embarrassing at first. In fact I felt almost furtive about this alien activity. After all, keeping a diary was something that I associated with angst-ridden teenage girls clutching small strangely patterned books with flimsy locks barely containing within them the deathless detail of their many unconsummated crushes. It simply did not feel like the kind of thing that I or any other self respecting executive might do.

I found that getting started at first was a really painful process. I recall at one point feeling virtually paralysed with pen in hand, numb to the page, until I remembered my coach giving me some ‘prompts’ to use in case I got stuck. So I dug these out, chose one at random, then got writing. The initial prompt that I chose was entitled

Prompt 1: ‘The things that I forgot to say to my coach during our last coaching session was (finish that sentence)’

I well remember that, after a moment’s hesitation, I wrote down the prompt then launched into about twenty minutes uninterrupted writing. It was as if a veritable tsunami of responses had been released, crashing onto the beach of my virgin page in wave after wave of unbroken expression. What I found myself writing down was a scribbled record of things that I had thought about bringing up during the coaching session, but which, for one reason or another, I had held back on. In fact I wrote beside some of them the category ‘things that I didn’t pluck up the courage to mention’, implying that I had avoided them in the coaching conversation, which was probably true. This list of shame included things that I had neglected to do; conversations at work that I had chickened out of having, even when I knew that there were issues to be faced with people that I do not find it easy to confront or face; commitments to myself that I had not followed through on, and also a noting of occasions where I felt I had let myself and perhaps others down. So I wrote all of this down and do you know, when I had finally exhausted myself I cast an eye over my handiwork, and I was really quite impressed with the quality of the writing that had made it onto the page. I was expecting it to be nonsense, but it wasn’t. Don’t get me wrong it was by no means velvet prose, but I felt that it did the job for me, capturing the things that were on mind with all manner of light and shade that I did not even know I was thinking. It also included feelings that had never found a conscious voice before.

Such was the impact of all of this upon me that I distinctly remember putting my writing pad down, while gazing in a dreamy way out of the window at the garden, without really seeing the garden at all. And then, unconscious that I had made a decision to move, I found myself out in the garden itself, kicking the occasional log and caressing the odd leaf in an absent way while allowing what I had written to settle in my mind. And again, without really realising that I had done it, there I was indoors and at the table once again, writing. It was as though a

second wave of revelation was washing through me, bringing fresh perspective on the issues that I had been identifying and wrestling with during my first outpouring on the page. I found myself feeling really excited as this second wave revealed itself. There were within it nuggets of useful if un-worked through ideas and even of viable solutions to some of the tricky issues I was then facing. I even starred one or two of these ideas for immediate action.

Pleased with what was unfolding in front of me, I then decided to take things a step further forward by writing up some of the ideas and conclusions on my laptop, carefully securing these thoughts in a folder firmly labelled 'private'. Part of reason for doing this, I told myself, was because these notes would prove really useful in the planning for my next coaching session the following week, and that keeping them on my hard drive would mean that they were easily accessible. If nothing else, I reasoned, the existence of these notes might help stiffen my resolve not to avoid mentioning issues that need facing up to during coaching next time around. Then a penny dropped. It occurred to me that instead of relying on my own wavering courage to bring some of this stuff up, why not instead send on some edited highlights to my coach, with a view to accelerating our conversation, and also to ensure that we spend our precious time addressing the issues that are big for me, rather than skirting around the interesting but probably diversionary periphery?

As I weighed the option of sending something through to my coach, I dimly remembered my coach reflecting that while our coaching conversations only occupied one hour of our time each week; that if the process worked well, that the thread of these conversations should continue to play out somewhere in my awareness during the course of the intervening week. Well, this had been somewhat true in my experience, though in all honesty the pressures of deadlines and sometimes the sheer volume of decisions I have to make on a daily basis would more often than not drive out any possibility of sustained reflection time. It occurred to me that committing myself to the discipline of journaling, of writing up my coaching follow-up might just provide the means to circumvent the tyranny of the day to day.

I have noticed that as I have proceeded more deeply into my experiment with incorporating reflective writing into my coaching and learning experience, that the writing process has somehow deepened as I have become more in the writing habit. The more I familiar I have become with this process, then the more it seems that my concerns for the mechanics of writing or grammar or whatever have fallen away. These have proven of lesser and lesser significance compared to my allowing some of my inner thoughts and disquiets and hopes as well as nagging anxieties to find expression in my journal. Without this expression they would not go away but instead remain in the shadows, grumbling around to God knows what undermining effect on my daily life. In fact I am not at all sure how the writing process works, but since doing it I have felt that I have somehow been more in charge of my job, and of my life. It has felt as though I am running the show, the show of my life, rather than surrendering that to someone else, to some unknown someone else.

A later journal entry, written after a particularly intense coaching session.

Gosh that was quite a coaching session, was it not? We seemed to cover so much. I feel at one and the same time empty, exhausted yet also brimming full of semi-processed ideas and suggestions. I feel a little giddy with it all. I am glad that I have gotten in the habit of doing this coaching writing as soon as I can after the session as I am possibly able, before the spell of what we have created between us is broken, before the bubble is punctured by the

vibration of my Blackberry in my pocket or the flicker of the 'you have mail' prompt across my screen.

Talking of prompts, I remember my coach creating a couple of coaching prompts for me before the session ended, which might help me sort my head out. What he does now – and I find this quite intriguing – is to create customised prompts for me at the end of each session, depending in the subject matter we have covered, rather than pulling prompts that he was made earlier out of some magical coaches hat. At the time they seemed like great prompts, but do you know what? I am not quite ready for a prompt yet. I need to bide my time, wait for the thought to dawn. One thing I have learned from this writing business is I need what I call a 'writing warm-up', as much as a sports-person needs a warm up before they perform. I need to write this kind of gibberish to myself before I am really ready to get going. In fact I notice as I write that it is as if I am writing to someone, yet the person that I am writing this to is myself. How does that work? Is it some kind of inner chatter that I capture when I write to myself? Or is to some unknown audience out there that I address, patiently reading and waiting for wisdom to spill onto the page? The funny thing is that while you can't predict when it is that you will be ready to write the real stuff, the stuff that matters; you recognise that moment when it comes, and then you let the real material flow, mostly discarding the writing generated during the warm up. And just as I write this I sense that that feeling, that feeling of writing the real stuff, is imminent. The kids are in bed if not asleep. TV News rumbles on somewhere in the background, and I know now that I have the kitchen to myself for half an hour or so. Where did I leave my list of prompts? Now is the time to pick one.