VULNERABILITY, CULTURE AND COACHING

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I have been inspired to write this paper because I am very aware of vulnerability being a source of excitement and learning. At the same time, there is the paradox that it can be confusing and indeed sometimes frightening. A client recently said to me that his aim was to create an atmosphere of learning, rather than fear. I understand and support his aim. At the same time I know that learning can come from fear. Arguably it is sometimes a matter of 'the brighter the light, the darker the shadow'.....and vice-versa: that profound awkwardness, confusion and even despair can ultimately be a source of insight; though, of course, not necessarily so. This duality of dynamic tension will be a key theme in this article. There are other core dimensions which I shall cover, including the individual and the collective. Vulnerability is, almost by definition, something deeply personal; at the same time it is very likely to have wider causes and consequences in terms of communities and cultures; indeed there is also a global dimension.

As the title of this paper suggests, I will be exploring vulnerability through the lens of coaching. However, as indicated above, there is a broader and deeper setting which I wish first to put in place. This is covered in the next section, The Fundamentals, considering some core points regarding definition, philosophy, psychology and the context. There then follows The Implications for Coaching. Here I specifically look at the challenges faced by the coach and the actions she might take better to support the process of being a part of and apart from her own sense of vulnerability; in doing so then to be a part of and apart from her client's (coachee's) world.

I aim to be alert to the risk of becoming overly invested in particular ways of seeing the world. Quite often passion can evolve into intolerance, procedure into rigidity and a platform of understanding becomes a prison of prejudice. Indeed, as I later outline, this movement from flexibility to rigidity itself can be both the cause and consequence of vulnerability. In essence we can become trapped by that which we create (Sull 2002).

THE FUNDAMENTALS

Definitions dimension

It is an intriguing aspect of vulnerability that whilst there is a starkness, 'I feel at risk', there will often be some ambiguity and uncertainty; indeed this latter aspect may be a significant part of the vulnerability. 'I do not know why I feel vulnerable'……'I am not sure what might happen'……'I am not sure what to do……'

This amorphousness is reflected in dictionary definitions (Penguin 2003, Collins 2005); there are various perspectives here, open to differing interpretations; for example, capable of being hurt, open to criticism, liable to temptation, defenceless, tender, sensitive and thin-skinned. Just these few words raise the point about whether it might be an indication of weakness in some way – 'Am I too quick to take offence?' There is also the issue of choice – perhaps the person is choosing to put

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himself at risk; in other instances the sense of threat might be totally unexpected; or one has no choice but to take a gamble in some way – such as fleeing the terror of war and genocide, or standing up to a bullying elder brother. There is also the matter of the extent to which the sense of vulnerability is energised more by the past, perhaps a distant past, or is clearly located and experienced in the present; or indeed a mixture. For example, I may feel vulnerable in relation to my new boss, but it is nothing to do with her; rather the fact that my previous boss used to enjoy scoring points at my expense and humiliating me in front of others.

There is also the collective dimension where perhaps I belong to a group that has long felt persecuted or I am a member of a so-called inferior caste which has never over the centuries been regarded as equal. I am denied justice even in the most terrifying of circumstances; the Rohingya people of Myanmar, a disenfranchised Muslim community, being just one of many examples.

Whilst on the theme of definitions, a colleague mentioned that the Latin root of the word vulnerability is 'vulnus', meaning wound. That prompted her to think of the Jungian archetype, the Wounded Healer (Guggenbuhl-Craig 1992). There are those who seek to heal others because of their own pain. On that basis this may be a source of avoidance, for example through projection, or clarity and perceptiveness.

There might also be those who are quick to declare their sense of vulnerability simply because it is fashionable; 'that is what good coaches are supposed to do'. Such an introject – a rule swallowed whole – is unlikely truly to enhance engagement with self or others. Indeed it may indicate a racket feeling (Stewart and Joines 1987), energising the Victim Position and inviting others jointly to create a negative symbiosis from the Persecutor or Rescuer Positions within the Drama Triangle (Phillips 2011).

I conclude this section by offering my own definition. I do so having been prompted by a loving and teasing intervention from a colleague who suggested that my earlier failure to offer a definition might be the consequence of my own sense of vulnerability. So, with gratitude, my response is, 'Vulnerability is a sense of feeling and fearing being wounded, literally and/or metaphorically'.

Philosophical dimension
Often one of the challenges in the context of vulnerability is how to find some solid ground. As already indicated, definitions may not readily provide this; the topic of vulnerability can evoke vulnerability. Indeed when working on an early draft of this paper in a supermarket cafe, my neighbour at the adjacent table pointed out, with a warm smile on her face, that I was sighing a lot. I was feeling vulnerable in writing about vulnerability. The content reflected my process and my process reflected the content. This potential synergy may end up being invaluable if I am sufficiently alert to it.

In seeking further solid ground I am aware that currently one of the key influences in my thinking is postmodernism which, to quote Neville Kirk, 'places a premium on difference, diversity, nuance and fragmented.....thoughts and actions' (Kirk 1997). Yet this also is fragile as it seeks solidity. There is the potential liberation which emphasises choice and the prospect of moving between identities; choosing to be different people in different situations. At the same time this invitation to freedom may slowly or dramatically reframe as an obligation. "You can be whatever you want to be!", becoming an oppressive and self-righteous exhortation. Similarly forgiveness is sometimes stated as

a necessary precondition for moving on; yet this stance may perpetuate the pain and paradoxically enhance the power of its source.

This notion of choice reminds me, with warmth and gratitude of a Shea Schiff workshop which I attended many years ago in my early training as a transactional analyst. He spoke of 'osmosis' regarding the experience of working with troubled clients; that one might unwittingly absorb their feelings. Until that moment I had believed that I always had a choice about what I felt. Shea Schiff's comment was for me an 'epistemological break'; that is a completely different way of seeing the world (Morris 1991).

In exploring the concept and experience of vulnerability I am aware that some degree of generalisation is necessary and indeed inevitable. At the same time, as suggested by Chris Argyris and Donald Schon, there needs to be a willingness to challenge assumptions and indeed assumptions about assumptions in order to learn; that is, double-loop learning (Argyris and Schon 1978). Consequently in this paper I will keep balancing the general and the particular; and be resolutely tentative.

Psychological Dimension
In times of uncertainty often there is a yearning for clarity and truths; *the* answer. On that basis, when faced with vulnerability whether one's own or another's there can be a strong desire to achieve certainty regarding the cause and the actions which can be taken. Indeed they may rapidly be interpreted as a 'must be taken'. In order to achieve this, frequently there is then a powerful urge to move away from ambiguity and into right and wrong, good and bad. This may well relate not only to actions but assessment of people; escalating into idealisation and demonisation, perhaps not only in relation to others, but also to oneself. One may be heavily judgemental towards oneself as a way of seeking to establish clarity; or perhaps one is seduced into grandiosity. Data or experiences, about self or others which do not match the solidifying hypothesis are ignored or minimised; the transactional analysis concept of discounting describes such a process (Woollams and Brown 1978).

People may also keep quiet about contrary or controversial evidence in order then to retain some sense of belonging. However that may come with the price of feeling alienated from self. Then, for example, being even more self-critical for betraying oneself and one's principles. Consequently the potential for an ever increasing vicious circle where the alienation from self creates an even greater desire to be intimate with others and there is then an ever growing sense of betraying oneself. Ultimately the child within oneself scarcely knowing what he really wants; or even who he is. Sometimes there is an urgent desire to break out and tell the truth at last. However in the accumulated pressure of anger and fear a person can lose sight of his options. For example, I had one client who wanted to confront his bullying and deceptive boss head-on in terms of 'you and me now'. History showed that his boss could not be trusted and indeed could be vengeful and vindictive, but in a very clever and political way. So my client might well have put himself even more at risk by taking a direct, personal and focussed approach; his boss might have felt cornered and then decided to be even more toxic. So the client and I considered some rather more subtle and less instinctive approaches where he could cautiously and diligently take a number of small, indirect actions to protect himself and increase the chances of exiting his current role in a reasonably safe way.

To summarise a key theme from these fundamentals: working with vulnerability, whether one's own or another's may well mean being willing to 'hold' ambiguity and uncertainty; perhaps even actively

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seeking or generating it, whilst at the same time 'holding' a powerful drive for clarity and resolution, both in terms of the what and the how, the content and the process. Through this 'holding' then to create a safe space for exploration; even exploration of how to create a safe space for exploration; vicious circles becoming virtuous circles.

Micro/Macro Dynamics Dimension

Now to explore that which I call the 'micro/macro dynamics dimension' as outlined in the model below. It indicates that vulnerability may flow between the global and the intrapersonal, and various points in between.
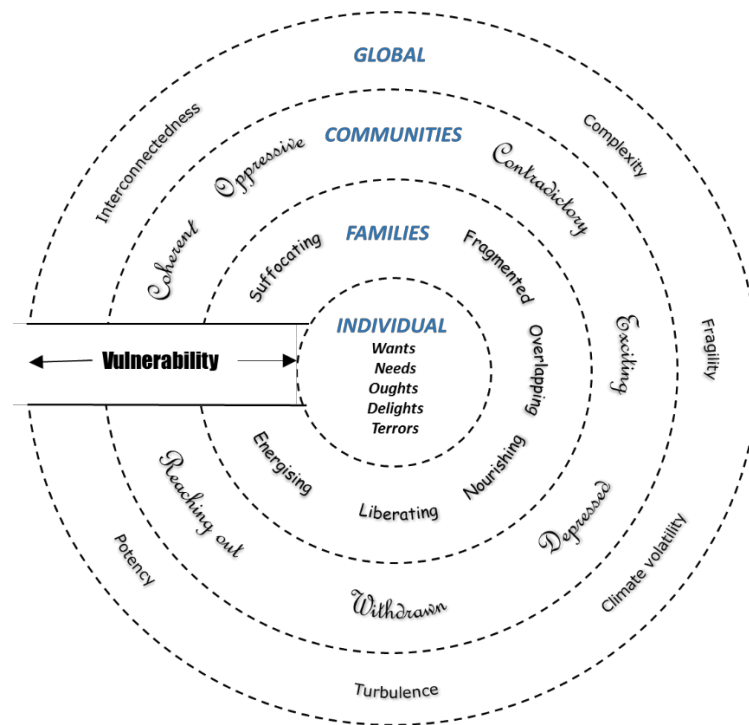

Figure 1. The Micro/Macro Dynamics Dimension

I now offer brief illustrations for each of the circles.

Global Movements

The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard wrote that 'Maximum interconnectedness means maximum vulnerability' (Baudrillard 1994). I modified this with the addition of......'*and* maximum potency' (Phillips 2010). For example, social media provide an opportunity, indeed for some an incentive for bullying and trolling; there is the presumed immunity of anonymity which can lead to the collective persecution of individuals. Equally it can mean that a simple, but powerful image or moment in time can have a significantly beneficial impact. For example, during the Vietnam War the iconic picture of the young naked Vietnamese girl, Phan Thi Kim Phuk fleeing the flames caused by South Vietnamese napalm bombs in 1972 affected American public opinion. Moving forward to the present and an era of even greater interconnectedness the almost globally contemporaneous sight of three year old boy Aylan al Kurdi dead with his face in the water on the beach at Bodrum seemed to cause, at least

temporarily, an immediate softening of view in Europe regarding the treatment of asylum seekers. His vulnerability was starkly and tragically evident for all to see.

There is also the impact of global warming and the growing unpredictability of the weather. To quote Pearl Drego, 'We live in an age in which nature has grown tired of being treated like a Parent. Nature is exhausted from giving endlessly, devastated from being exploited at every turn, traumatized by incessant dumping' (Drego 2009). Many may feel vulnerable regarding these trends and are highly aware of their current impact, including locations which not that long ago would in people's minds have been merely vaguely located on a map somewhere.

Within the current global setting where the rate and extent of change continue to accelerate, the challenging of assumptions about assumptions in order to learn is as much about survival as growth. Consequently there is a greater inclination to see negative strokes as directed towards 'being' rather than just 'doing'; 'I am stupid', rather than 'Sometimes I make mistakes'. Also, where reaching out – whether as networking or seeking loving support – becomes vital then a lack of response from others can readily be interpreted as a Don't Exist injunction (Phillips 1975); whereas it might simply be that people are too busy surviving. This aspect of making feedback or the lack of it highly personal links back to the earlier point I made in the Psychological Dimension section when I referred to people being heavily judgemental towards themselves.

Communities

Clearly communities can be a source of comfort and support in the face of vulnerability; equally they may themselves generate vulnerability; both these aspects may apply almost simultaneously. For example, people may have to move between different communities and cultures where there are conflicting values; perhaps ultimately feeling they do not truly belong anywhere. Others may find or create opportunities for love, fun and the demonstration of talent through the divergence and diversity. This is beautifully shown in the film 'Bend it Like Beckham'.

There may be a less immediately obvious contradiction which can sometimes exist. An expectation that people reinvent themselves……but not too much; or pressure to be unique, different in some way, but not to be so successful in doing so as to evoke envy and perhaps a sense of betrayal.

I am reminded of a recent conversation with a colleague who has long experience of working with young people, both in the United Kingdom and overseas. She spoke of the encouragement and loving support that students might offer each other; for example, during some intense face-to-face discussions about employment prospects or the challenges of racial or sexual discrimination. Yet, almost simultaneously that same group might use social media to tease relentlessly one of its members who, for example, chose to experiment with her hair style. It was almost as if, my colleague suggested, that the medium defined the message and that there could be a very different personality which revealed itself on Facebook or Twitter as opposed to face-to-face. The social media supporting, indeed creating a world of instant judgement - like/not like. On that basis a person may feel profoundly reluctant to try something different; for example, reconciling themselves to receiving hostility and seeing it as justified by believing that the awkwardness they felt when experimenting was inevitably a sign of their own inauthenticity.

Stepping back a little more I am also very aware how, for example in London, dramatically different worlds can be just a few breaths away. There can be the huge excitement and enrichment of diversity which may flow from this. Equally one can walk through an area of affluence, turn a corner and be faced with abject poverty and deprivation. The intrapersonal challenges of light and dark are mirrored and resonate at a tangible community and cultural level.

Another facet of the word culture refers to the land – cultivation and tillage. This in itself can be a crucial feature of belief and sense of oneself and community. A basis for 'holding', emotionally, spiritually and practically one's family and ancestors. Maori, for example, if following their tradition will introduce themselves on the basis of naming their mountain……then their river……then their canoe……then their founding ancestor……then their tribe……then their sub-tribe……then their meeting house……then where they are from……then the names of their parents……and then their name. In another example, the profoundly destructive consequences of the native North Americans being sent to reservations; they lost their connections with their world past, present and future, and at all levels, practical and divine. Similarly the Enclosure Movement in England in the 18th and 19th centuries, when many were ejected from previously communally worked land, broke people's hearts and souls as well as depriving them of their livelihood. Lives literally and metaphorically torn up by the roots; no longer grounded.

This reminds me of Sigmund Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia (Falzeder 2002). That which is tangible and acknowledged in some way can be mourned. However there may be a much less accessible and understood sense of melancholia which may be passed down through the generations; unaware scripting, visceral, spiritual and beyond words (Frosh 2013). Sometimes the spiritual ritual of sacrifice honours that which one treasures; it may heal or keep wounds open.

Families
The idea of scripting provides a framework for exploring vulnerability within the family, as well as the wider cultural context. Regarding the family as Stan Woollams and Michael Brown wrote, when describing the 'vulnerability quotient' in relation to child rearing, the grown-ups are in a much more powerful position than the children (Woollams and Brown 1978). Indeed family members usually know precisely how to hurt each other.

All the nourishing, toxic, neutral and mixed experiences which flow in the family provide significant raw material covering key script questions such as, 'What sort of family are we?', 'What is the world around us like?', 'To which community do we belong?' and 'What happens to people like us?' This then leads to a self-fulfilling pattern of learning and living:
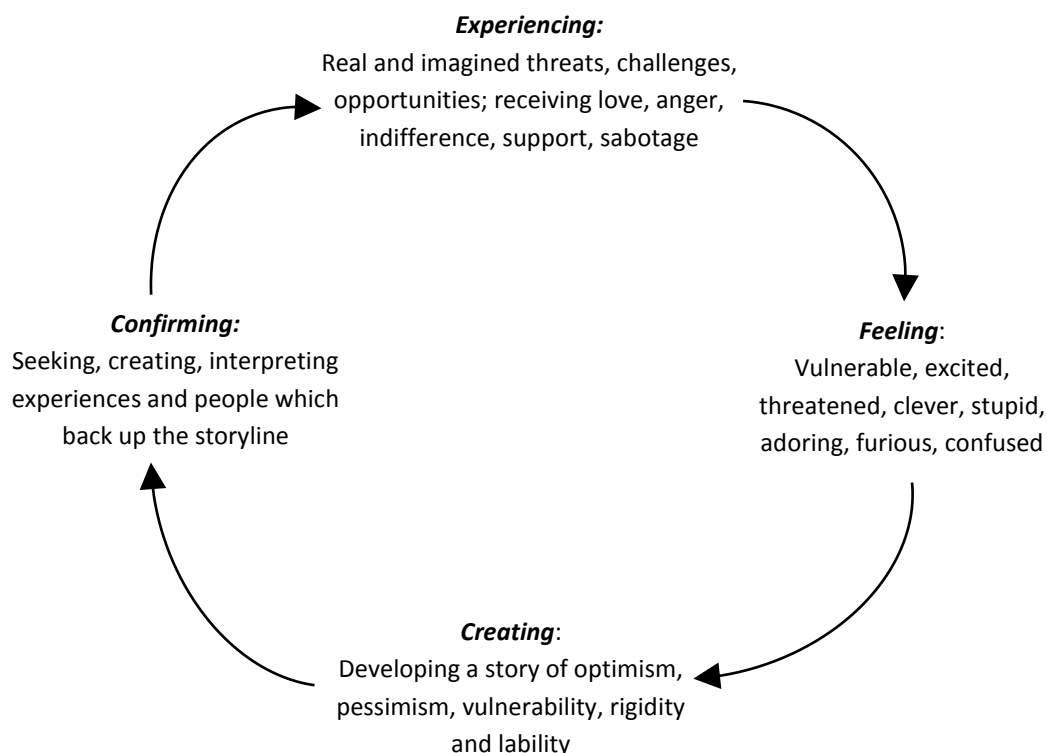
Experiencing:
Real and imagined threats, challenges, opportunities; receiving love, anger, indifference, support, sabotage

Confirming:
Seeking, creating, interpreting experiences and people which back up the storyline

Feeling:
Vulnerable, excited, threatened, clever, stupid, adoring, furious, confused

Creating:
Developing a story of optimism, pessimism, vulnerability, rigidity and lability

Figure 2. Scripting

As already indicated in the Communities section somebody may have a sense of belonging to several families; for example, a family at work and a family at home. Consequently she may develop an all-embracing script which can 'hold', perhaps even personally integrate these worlds which may apparently be very different. The work of the 'helper' – teacher at evening class, long lost friend, coach, counsellor, quietly supportive neighbour, therapist, gossipy newsagent, specialist supervisor, aware leader, chance travelling companion, adoring cat – may be a key factor in supporting this.

There are others who are not able to create such an over-arching story. They have an ongoing sense of dislocation which applies to both self and the world. There is then an ever-increasing desire to belong which becomes ever-more desperate. Perhaps on occasion this is where the mesmerising attraction of extremism lies.

The Individual
Regardless of its many varying, even abrasive components the script develops its own unique flow. A friend of mine told me that her father was in many ways an open-minded and generous man who often befriended strangers. Indeed he could almost be "a person-centred counsellor", as she put it. However he was totally different at home and seemed unable or unwilling to demonstrate much generosity either in action or spirit. Just one example was his stony refusal in any way to help her explore her desire to work in the theatre. My friend says that ultimately she was able to find a way of living with these contradictions in her father. A rhythm developed, even though it was necessarily uncomfortable.

This I illustrate in the model below, which I adapted from the work of Mavis Klein (Klein 1980).
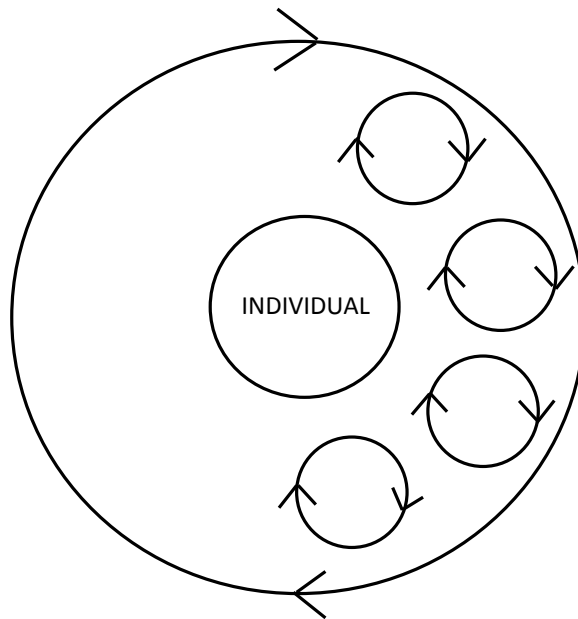
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Figure 3. Scripting Reinforcement

This shows how the daily, even minute-by-minute patterns of thoughts, feelings, beliefs and behaviours support a broader and deeper perception of self and life. For example, somebody who believes that fundamentally he is less important than others may have the habit at staff meetings of prefacing his suggestions with a slight shrug.

Over time or suddenly there may be a disruption of the script's rhythm – falling in love; falling out of love; a boss's comment in an appraisal, "You are capable of so much more!"; the loss of a loved one; the threat of downsizing; a close friend suddenly becoming distant; a tipping point reached as a result of many small changes. This may bring to the surface script decisions, both aware and unaware.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's renowned transition curve model defined such a process linked to bereavement (Kubler-Ross 1970). It has been modified in many ways over the years. For example, describing the ebb and flow of one's sense of personal competence during personal and organisational change. At the point of greatest darkness there may be a burst of light (Spencer and Adams 1990).

I made a modification linking the curve to the Jungian shadow and suggesting that at the bottom there can be a point of extreme darkness and 'stuckness' which I called The Cusp (Phillips 2011).
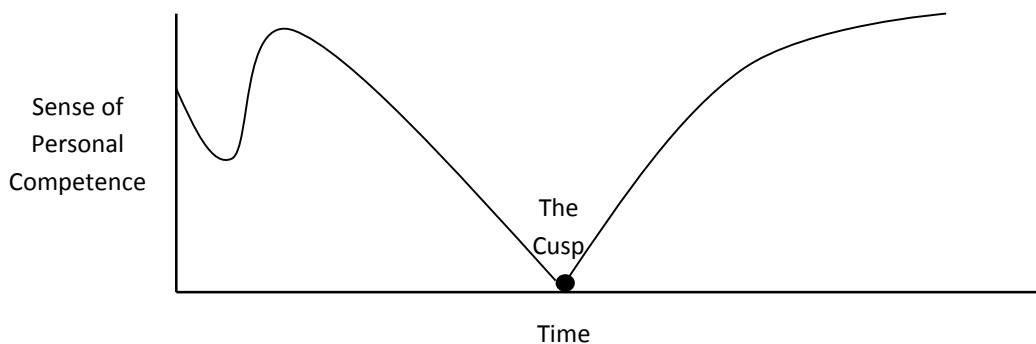

Figure 4. The Cusp

The Cusp is a point where thoughts, beliefs and feelings are subject to quite contradictory pulls – 'I want to stay……and I want to leave; I am filled with excitement……then terror; I want to rise above all of this and forgive……I want to exact revenge'. Sometimes it can be a challenge to know what one feels at all; perhaps archaic child feelings start coming to the surface, but in a totally unrecognised way. Within this there is the possibility of sudden insight; that which may come from embracing the shadow.

I am also reminded of a recent conversation with a client who said that she often procrastinated with that aspect of her business about which she felt most passionate. It was as if the adventurous child and the reclusive child within her were vying to be the favourite. An opportunity for script release may be a moment of maximum, sometimes elusively subtle resistance; as indicated by William Holloway when describing the escape hatch (Holloway 1977).

In concluding this section I want to emphasise the ebb and flow between the individual and the collective. For example, the process of the Cusp may be intensely personal. It may however also reflect a much wider phenomenon. The organisation may also be on the Cusp. Perhaps an ever stronger drive towards greater structuring, control and measurement; at the same time there may be an equally strong drive towards experimentation, the creation of flatter structures and pushing the boundaries of flexibility. If seen through the lens of transactional analysis then there may be an excessive rigidity and lability of ego state boundaries; this indicating parallel process – that is, resonances between the micro and macro dimensions, each reinforcing the other often outside awareness (Phillips 2009). These dynamics may ultimately lead to a healthy, much needed reparenting of self and the organisation (Phillips 2014). However, as described by Paul Babiak and Robert Hare there may be a shadow outcome instead, with greater opportunities for 'snakes in suits', that is psychopaths to thrive (Babiak and Hare 2006). They may have a charisma which is plausible, seductive and exciting, particularly in times of turbulence. However their legacy to those who adored them may on occasion be seen as a negative bull's-eye transaction, in the language of transactional analysis; that is, abused values at the level of the Parent ego state; idiosyncratic and incoherent decision-making at the level of the Adult ego state; and betrayal at the level of the Child ego state.

I now move on to considering these Fundamentals in the context of coaching.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COACHING

Definition
Coaching means many different things to many different people; increasingly so as in recent years there has been the growing influence of counselling and therapy. The definition which currently informs my practice is that which I gave in 'Coaching in Organisations: Between the Lines'; that is, 'A series of conversations, usually between two individuals, where one, the coach seeks to help the other, the coachee, become more effective at work' (Phillips 2004). On that basis a wide range of possibilities can arise within a coaching session, for example from skills to the existential; that is from how to challenge a difficult colleague, through to what the client wants to do in his life. Clearly there can be movement between these areas: a session based on acquiring presentation skills may suddenly bring to the surface a client's (coachee's) lack of self confidence; there may even be some

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echoes of childhood. This range of possibilities raises a number of ethical challenges. I will not cover these here since they are already extensively explored in the literature; for example, by Katharine St John-Brooks (2014). Suffice to say that such a switch of focus may prompt vulnerability within the coach. In one respect there may be concern about whether she feels she will be able to handle the client's newly emergent need. Secondly, because of the existential dimension arising she may then enter further the world of shared humanity and the potential resonances with her own life, current, past or a mixture.

There are two main elements in the sections which follow. First, a description of two key challenges which can arise: Balancing Intimacy and Separation, and Noting the Difference Between Understanding and Explanation; secondly, two possible actions, Reflecting with Compassion and Being Alert to Gifts from the Universe which can be relevant in working with those challenges.

CHALLENGES

Balancing Intimacy and Separation
Regardless of the particular type of coaching it is essentially about helping the client to be an observer of self in relation to the issue of concern. This is illustrated in the model below.
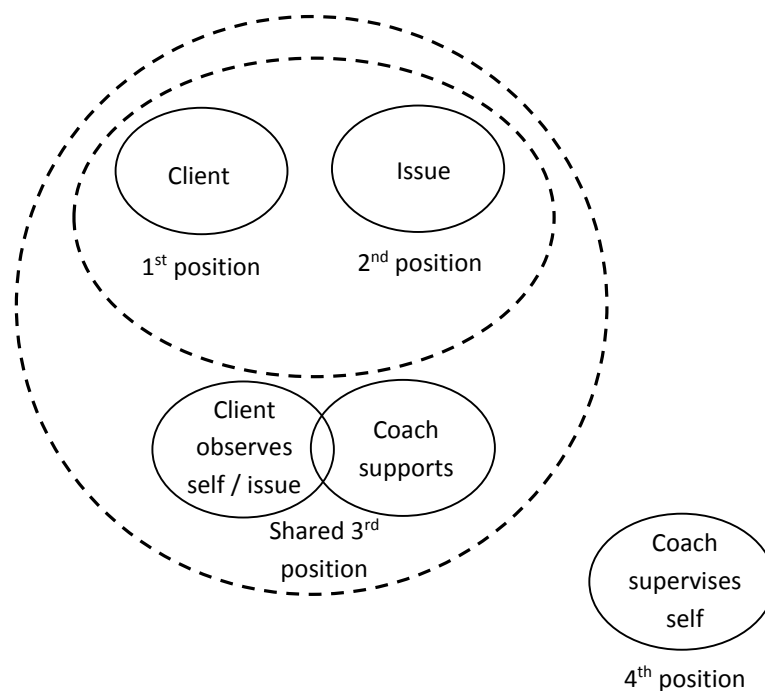

Figure 5. Balancing Intimacy and Separation

As shown, both parties share the 3rd Position, whilst the coach also stands back from the whole process in order to supervise herself from the 4th Position. So she is also a part of and apart from herself; as well as in relation to the client.

If the coach enters the client's world too far then there is too much overlap and the boundaries solidify into barriers and the coach ceases to supervise herself. There is a negative confluence where both parties are immersed in vulnerability – the client's, the coach's or a mixture. A loss of self through an excess of intimacy. This is illustrated below:
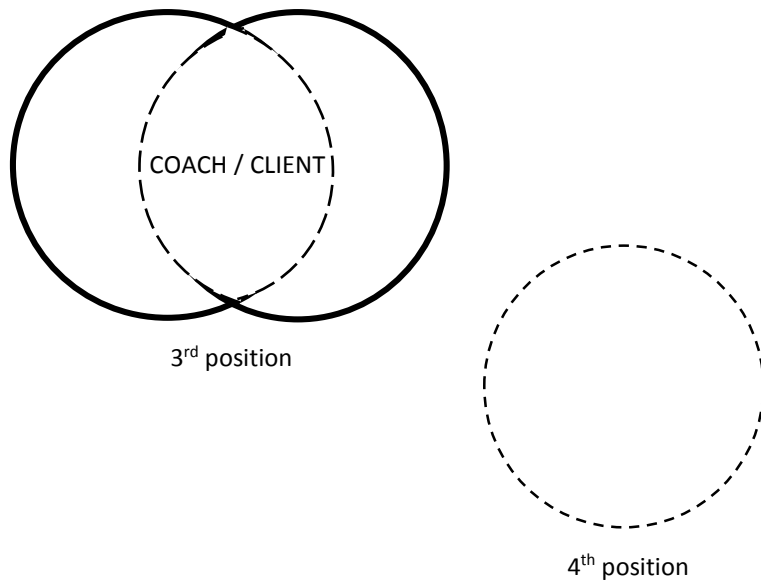
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COACH / CLIENT

3rd position

4th position

Figure 6. Confluence

Another possibility flowing from this lapse of self-supervision is that the coach becomes armoured; separating herself totally from the client's world. As a consequence the client feels abandoned, no longer held by the coach or indeed himself. This is illustrated in the diagram below:
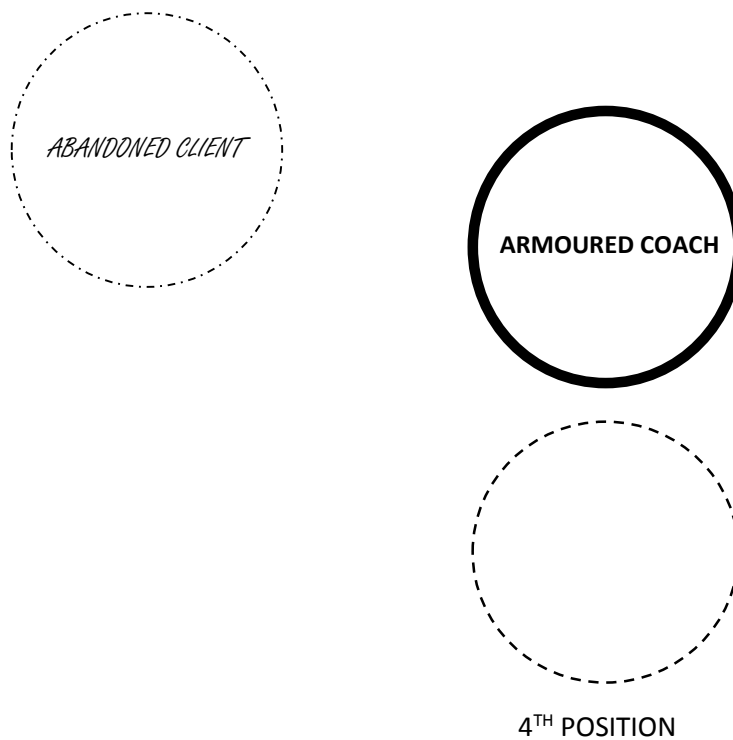
ABANDONED CLIENT

ARMOURED COACH

4TH POSITION

Figure 7. Armouring

This may happen as a result of the coach being caught up totally in her own world, including possible pain. However, frequently such armouring is more subtle and less easily detected; here the coach

disengages from her own child and escapes into explanation and interpretation, rather than understanding. This is described more fully in the next section.

Noting the Difference Between Understanding and Explanation

There have been many pioneers in the last half-century who have, without necessarily using these words, recognised the importance of drawing a clear distinction between understanding and explanation. For example, Gavin Miller in describing R.D. Laing and the anti-psychiatry movement refers to the contribution of Thomas Szasz writing that he, '…...lucidly points out that much psychoanalysis persuades another person to change his behaviour (or at least regard it as deviant) by a kind of rhetorical victory' (Miller 2005). There can be a rush to diagnosis and persuasion, subtle or otherwise, rather than understanding; that is, rather than truly entering the client's world and seeking to perceive it through his eyes and heart. As already indicated, this can happen in the coaching room in the context of vulnerability. There are several aspects to consider here, each linked to points outlined earlier:

First, there is the desire for certainty. The client is in a world of uncertainty and ambiguity and the coach may not be comfortable with this; indeed feeling some degree of vulnerability through her empathy. However sometimes this may be magnified by a vulnerability related to her role – 'Will I be able to cope?', or resonances with her own vulnerabilities. She is overly keen to look for causes and consequences and to offer, in transactional analysis terms an apparently Adult ego state analysis. The true motivation behind this may simply be that her own child wants to run away.

Secondly, there is engagement at the level of doing, rather than being; this at a time when the client's needs are existential and perhaps spiritual. The coach, for example, diligently pursues the topic of 'next steps'; "What action will you take?". However the client really needs some quiet time simply to gather himself. He may experience the coach's eagerness to move on as her giving him a negative stroke. This may also have resonances with childhood. For example, I am reminded of Jean Illsley-Clark writing that children are more likely to experience negative strokes in childhood as directed at being, even when on the surface they seem to be directed at doing. (Illsley-Clarke 1998).

Thirdly, there may be undue emphasis on compliance rather than creativity. One facet, already touched on is persuading the client to accept one's view as correct. Another is possible collusion at a community level: professional worlds often have extensive jargon and specialist language and rituals which can be a block rather than a conduit to understanding. The training and accreditation process, with its associated formal and informal hierarchy may nurture this contradiction, even when it evolves into hypocrisy. For example, some coach training establishments will diligently educate and support the trainee coach in the skills of challenging, as applied to working with a client (coachee). However that same establishment may prove to be unwilling or unable to handle challenges from the trainee coach about the quality of the training or the method of assessment.

Also such professional bodies may offer themselves as places of healing; but, as indicated, subsequently prove themselves to be an undermining environment built on inconsistent parenting. The consequential betrayal, can provoke a profound, indeed visceral sense of vulnerability and disorientation. This may resonate with the trainee coach's childhood. Indeed at some level it may have been a core reason why he wanted to train as a coach.

I am also reminded of speaking to a colleague who said that sometimes institutions of higher and further education can be rigid when facing the challenge of widening participation and engaging with potential students from deprived areas. He said that all too often there is an attempt to invite or persuade the young people to visit the institution so they can see what they are missing. My colleague said that there is an unspoken, indeed unaware arrogance and rigidity in this. What needs to be happening he passionately advocated was for the institution to have the courage, creativity and indeed humility truly to enter these communities, discover what they really want and need and then consider how they themselves and their institutions might change. This would then become an exercise in joint creation. In essence, he was saying that there needed to be a complete mind shift; a fundamental re-writing of the institution's script. The institution needed to acknowledge its own vulnerability in order to engage with the vulnerability of those they sought to attract.

POSSIBLE ACTIONS

I now move on to actions which might be supportive in handling these challenges.

Reflecting with Compassion
Earlier this week I was talking to a Spanish hotel receptionist based in London. She told me that after ten years in that role she was now ready for a change of job and indeed country. She was weary and saw London as a place filled with robots, simply scurrying forward all the time. I said it sounded as if she thought people were always rushing into the future and never had time for the present. She agreed and confirmed it with a warm smile.

In reflecting further on our delightful exchange I was prompted to consider the potentially vicious circle that might arise. Namely rushing into the future may be a way of trying to avoid vulnerability. However the very act of rushing forward may cause the accumulation of unfinished business and increase the chances of fearing possible 'rubberbanding'; that is, being catapulted back into the recent or distant past (Tilney 2003). Perhaps the greater the drive forward then the greater the tension on the rubberband and the greater the prospect of being thrown into an even more difficult or painful point in the past. Hence the even greater urgency to drive forward.

A compulsive drive forward may also, by definition, be a way of avoiding beginnings and endings; these being moments when one may feel most vulnerable. Another of my insightful colleagues suggested that beginnings and endings are particularly important for children: Mum or Dad leaving or arriving; going on holiday; starting school; Jane the elder sister heading off to university, etc. So, if as adults we pay insufficient attention to beginnings and endings then we may fail to acknowledge the child within ourselves; consequently creating a greater sense of vulnerability by failing to acknowledge its existence.

Additionally a lack of attention to beginnings and endings may mean that the process of transition is not heeded; thereby little in terms of celebration, mourning and learning.

So to reflect, to allow to the surface any content and process challenges, delights and excitements associated with endings, beginnings, transition and rubberbanding may potentially be invaluable, even as it is also shunned.

The coach may be able to support herself, and thereby her client, in a greater willingness to reflect if she decides to do it with 'compassion' towards herself. I was struck by this word when Liz Hall

mentioned it at the recent launch of her book (Hall 2015). Without sufficient compassion there is the risk of perpetuating and indeed fostering a world of negative strokes; one where, for example, coaches and clients may give themselves negative strokes for having given themselves negative strokes!

So the coach might offer the child within herself some unconditional love and generosity of spirit as part of the permission and protection involved in inducting herself into a world of greater reflection, whether in depth, time or general approach. For example, the coach might cautiously allow herself to use the earlier jargon and consider the possibility that she vacated the 4th Position in a coaching session, "OMG I wasn't really paying attention to the client's needs!" If true, there is much learning which may flow from that realisation; for example:

- The move to explanation may in fact have been wise in terms of protecting her own child; intuitively recognising that she might not have been able to cope if she were more open to herself, let alone her client, at that time.
- Learning often comes through the exploration of polarities in order then to have a clearer sense of the range of possibilities; one then also has a broader context against which to judge which actions might be taken. One of Ischa Bloomberg's quotes which I recall from one of his gestalt workshops was, "The only way to know you have had enough is to have had a bit too much". Therefore becoming overly separate and overly intimate (but within ethical guidelines, I hasten to add!) is arguably a necessary part of the learning journey. Indeed, for example, the insight gained may be may be invaluable at the next session working with a client who is faced with the intense polarities of being on the Cusp.

Reflection may be necessary simply to discover whether one had in fact been feeling vulnerable during the coaching session and the nature of the underlying dynamics; and then to consider ways of being more alert to it in the moment and the consequential options. Reflection can also bring to the surface the potentially positive symbiotic relationship between vulnerability and passion. As Adolf Guggenbuhl-Craig indicated (op cit), those who are deeply committed to their work may well be more likely to engage with their shadow. So, using coaching supervision as an example, three roles may be necessary:

Teacher- that is, educating the supervisee about the theory and practice of coaching

Guardian – that is, maintaining the ethical and practical standards of the profession

Healer – that is, offering personal support to help the supervisee cope with the emotional challenges of the work

As part of her journey in learning to move into and between these roles the supervisor may need to engage with, even embody the shadow of each in order then to discover her own grounded identity:

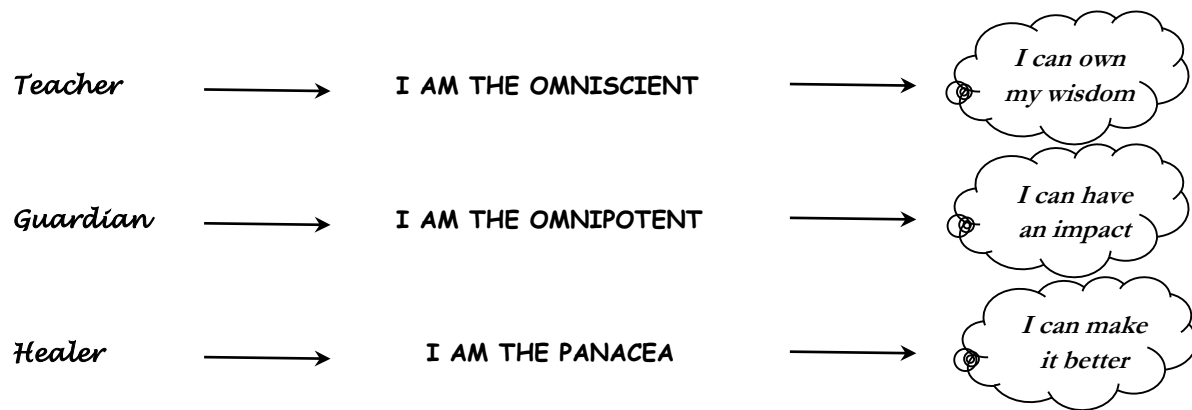| Teacher | → | I AM THE OMNISCIENT | → | *I can own my wisdom* |
| Guardian | → | I AM THE OMNIPOTENT | → | *I can have an impact* |
| Healer | → | I AM THE PANACEA | → | *I can make it better* |

Figure 8. Passion and Vulnerability

On such a pilgrimage engaging with one's vulnerability can be vital for engaging with one's passion; and engaging with one's passion can be vital for engaging with one's vulnerability.

Such reflections and reflecting can be powerful when shared with others such as fellow coaches and, as appropriate, with clients (coachees). The coaches may be working as a team and the pooling of such experiences, including the sharing of divergent perceptions, enables them to enhance the skills they need for working with their clients; and indeed the client organisation. Coaches within the team perhaps discovering that their similarities reflect a key strand within the organisation's culture; for example, a dash into intellectualising when there are some raw emotions present. So the shared identification of coaching options may also lead to fresh perspectives on organisation development interventions.

Being Alert to Gifts from the Universe
I continue to be amazed and delighted how brief moments and chance encounters can be so rich; for example, as mentioned above, the conversations with the coffee neighbour and the hotel receptionist. Perhaps it requires a degree of vulnerability to be open to, accept and even 'invite' such gifts.

Another type of delightful gift was described to me by a client. She had been given a painful, indeed punishing exit from an organisation to which she had devoted herself, body and soul. She was subsequently in a state of profound anger and despair. In the early days of redundancy one of the few bright spots was that she now had time to spend with her young niece. At first they were almost strangers to each other and the child was always keen to be able to see Mum and Dad at a moment's notice. However, over time their relationship deepened and the child was increasingly comfortable being with her; just the two of them. On one occasion they spent the whole day together. At the end of it, just as she was preparing to head back home to Mum and Dad the child turned to my client and said, with a huge smile on her face, "Thank you for a **beautiful** day!" It was a profoundly moving moment for my client. She suddenly realised, body and soul, that if she had stayed in her previous job then there would **never** have been such a moment. It was a significant turning point for her.

A CONCLUDING STORY

I recently had a delightful, yet rather awkward walk along the Thames path from Kingston to Richmond. The delightful part was simply the mixture of beautiful and engaging views across the

river on a sunlit day. The awkward part was the fact that a half-marathon was being run along the rather narrow, sometimes winding, muddy and bumpy path. On the best of days there can be some quick thinking manoeuvring needed in order to avoid overly amorous dogs or highly focussed, occasionally ruthless cyclists. So the addition of runners in varying degrees of playfulness, competitiveness and sweatiness was……interesting.

Anyway, it was with some relief and a little disappointment that I eventually arrived at Richmond Bridge. There I noticed a rather elegant woman in a long green dress looking beautiful and relaxed as she stretched out on the steps. Then a man approached her and said, "Can I take a photograph?" She nonchalantly replied, "Yes". I was filled with admiration and some envy; his courage and her coolness. Then, to my shock and consternation he said, "And what sort of dog is it?" She replied, "Pomeranian". I then realised that there had been a dog playing around in the bushes behind her. For some totally inexplicable reason I had been so totally focussed on the woman that I had missed the Pomeranian, cute as he was. He had wanted to take a photograph of her dog, not her!

Perhaps the whole experience was a gift from the universe reminding me, 'Always be willing to step back and check assumptions'........or 'Dogs can be a brilliant route to intimacy!'…….or perhaps it was simply, 'Enjoy the moment!'.

CONCLUSION

The concepts and experiences of vulnerability are multi-faceted and rich. As such, any exploration raises the possibility of excitement and adventure together with the potential risk of being overwhelmed in some way; for example, delighting in nuances and then being submerged in complexity; or reaching out to offer support and then uncovering one's own profound needs. Yet in all this there is the possibility of learning; learning which may be applicable in many different ways and settings.

William Desmond (Desmond 2006) made a distinction between two types of philosophers: the lovers and the theorists. 'The lovers are passionate in their search and speech; the theorists dispassionate and sober. The lovers love singularity and show it themselves; the theorists value universality and selfless understanding'. He follows that with, '....thinkers without love are sterile; lovers without thought mindless'. Learning about vulnerability may require the versatility of being both a lover and a theorist.

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Also, freely available on request, the following papers: 'The Delights and Terrors of Betrayal: Coaching Implications', 'Envy in Coaching and Coaching Supervision', 'Coaching, the Shadow and the Transition Curve'. This last paper is also included in my book, 'Transactional Analysis in Organisations'.

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