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EXPOSING ILLUSION, EMPOWERING CHOICE

How do we define identity? I feel strongly that I know who I am. Yet when I attempt to define my identity what comes up is a heritage, some locations, a gender, occupations, perhaps some beliefs and practices with which I choose to align. But to what extent have I chosen these things and what has chosen me?

The further I attempt to define my identity, the more this list of words and phrases seems inadequate to encompass what it really means to be human with a developing history and a shifting reality. The more I try to pin this down, the more the concept of my identity seems to dissipate into a Scotch Mist. Perhaps identity is only an illusion?

In this case study, an important turning point was the work in challenging a limiting belief that had been driving the client. And in the attempt to define the belief, how it appeared as an illusion. If such an undefinable concept can be such a strong driver in our lives, then why shouldn't we seek to choose what is driving us and in which direction?

Being able to choose which parts of her identity to align with and show up in the world have been crucial to this client. Coaching helped her to explore these aspects of herself and empower her choices.

THE CLIENT

She is a 34-year-old professional woman who came to Coaching after being on an isolated path of self-development; learning and growing through books and self-study. She is particularly drawn to the principles behind the Law of Attraction.

Through her self-study she recognised that from the ages of 11 through to 30, she had been suffering with varying levels of depression. She had become very familiar with all the coping mechanisms in her life. When she started to read about positive thinking and affirmations, she realised that it's all about mindset and that she could find her way out.

She proceeded to put this theory into practice and worked hard at checking her beliefs and focusing on positive thinking so that it has now become more natural to her.

During our first session, she announced in a powerful, solid and confident way; "I now know that I will never have depression again". I remember being struck by the force behind this statement. I believe I felt the power of positive thinking in action. I was particularly excited about the potential of bringing this energy into the coaching relationship.

THE CHALLENGE

Primarily the coaching was required to support her continued exploration and growth into this new way of life.

Recognising herself as an empath; sensitive to the emotions of others, she often found herself drained by people. Therefore, she had found it necessary to close herself off emotionally to work on developing her new self.

Now she was feeling ready to start letting people back in but it was important to do this in a way that she wouldn't lose herself. She talked about the importance of being able to recognise and express her emotions in the moment, rather than allowing them to build.

She talked about how it felt to express her needs and be assertive. "I feel like Bambi. Like a new born animal, all shaky and getting to its feet". This is how she felt bringing her new self into the world. She was on an emotional rollercoaster and often felt like she didn't know what to do.

She talked about how she would like to find her purpose and to develop a vision of how she wants her life to be. She has a strong sense that she is meant to be doing something worthwhile.

In starting to explore, she soon apologised for rambling and going all over the place. I gave permission to express as it came to her and assured her that we would make sense as we go along.

For the purpose of clarity and ease of reading, I have paraphrased conversations. However, in honour of the coaching relationship, I have used the client's own words as much as possible.

STARTING POINT

I asked if she had a sense of where to start our exploration. She talked about barriers that had had been stopping her from achieving her potential and working to her capabilities. These were beliefs that were limiting her and stopping her being all she can be.

She talked about being motivated by the fear of failure. When she was younger, she didn't feel this fear but she remembers a constant striving to be the best. As she grew older, she started to worry about failure and this made her lower her expectations of herself, achieving less but still feeling like a failure.

She had done some work on forgiveness, written pages and pages of stuff from the past that she hadn't realised was still in there and weighing her down. I sensed her confusion as she talked about having taken on other people's feelings and not knowing what belonged to her. She felt that forgiveness would be hard but thought it could be the way forward.

As part of my contracting process, I explain that coaching is about the here and now and the way forward. Nothing is off limits and clients often find themselves sharing things that they've never spoken about before but I will normally aim to bring the focus into the present.

When she was talking through forgiveness, I felt heaviness from her. I had an intuitive sense that because she had already spent much time dealing with her past that there may be another way of looking at things.

I gained permission to offer this and upon agreement I posed the question; "how would it feel to work on acceptance rather than forgiveness?"

There was an instant lightening in the air. She embraced this concept and said to feel like she could accept herself would be "amazing".

THE PROCESS

We started to explore her new self and bringing this into the world. The energy brought into the sessions was always enthusiastic, she enjoyed an exercise and was open to finding a new way to look at things.

"If I am not the best, I have failed"

The fear of failure surfaced again after a couple of sessions. She recognised that a key component of bringing her new self to the world was "getting better at internal confirmation of my worth". If she could get better at confirming her own worth, she would feel stronger and consequently would not need this from other people.

We explored this confirmation. I asked her; "what kind of confirmation is that confirmation?"

This simple, clean question was enough for her to make a full examination.

"Confirmation that I am enough. That I am providing things to people and the world that makes a difference."

Without prompt, she proceeded to explore the roots of this feeling and traced it back to childhood when she was very driven at school. She was intelligent and often top of the class. However, this position was lost when she moved to grammar school and found that she wasn't accepted into the sports teams (because they were already winning) and there were many other children "way more intelligent than me". She immediately lost her sense of self-worth and "never figured out a way to be ok with not being the best". Consequently, she couldn't accept being "mediocre" as this felt like she had failed.

We reflected upon this information from her adult self. She recognised this as the crux of her negative self-talk. She recognised pressure she had put on herself in carrying the belief; "If I'm not the best, I've failed".

"How could I ever live up to that?"

"No wonder I hated myself..."

Empowering the Belief

We explored the belief. It was most apparent in her work and personal relationships. She had high expectations of herself but her expectations of others were low. This would lead to her picking up responsibility for other people leaving her feeling unappreciated and drained.

We talked through the consequences of holding onto this belief. She recognised that in striving to be the best at everything, it is stopping her being the best at anything. If she wanted to be the best at something, it would take commitment and focus. She reflected upon the performance of an Olympic athlete who only concentrates on their particular area. She likes lots of variety in her life and therefore being the best at all these things is completely unachievable.

We talked about the payoff of holding onto this belief, or how it may be protecting her. She recognised that in not allowing herself to reach her potential, she was protecting herself from getting to that place and then still feeling like a failure.

This was quite a realisation because she is now starting to get the things she wants in her career. However, she is often left feeling overwhelmed, concerned and upset. She is worried that if she becomes successful, she still may not be happy. Then she will know the problem is with her and that she may never be happy. She has a fear of getting depression again and predicts that she could end up feeling bad for the rest of her life.

We disputed the belief by looking at the tangible consequences in her life from the times when she felt like she had failed. She couldn't identify anything tangible other than beating herself up with unrealistic expectations; she had never lost a job or anything like that.

When we started to define "The Best", she began to feel the irrationality of it. She recognised that the best on one day could mean something different the next. When trying to apply rational thought, there seemed nothing to define. She could feel the notion of the best slipping away like the Scotch Mist.

Now the illusion was apparent, we began to exchange the belief. Instead of being the best, she felt like it was achievable to aim to be the best that she can be. She recognised the necessity to be kind to herself and accept her humanness.

Instead of expecting to be the best, she embraced the notion of practicing, which seemed more practical and achievable. After all, how does someone become the best at something? They practice.

So, if something doesn't go according to plan the first time, she would affirm; "it's ok, we're practising and that's all part of getting it right".

We talked about how this new belief might operate in her life. She identified a trigger when she is feeling judged by others in the workplace for not having done something perfectly. She can see this differently now. If she feels judged by someone, they are probably misplacing their own feelings of perfection or inadequacy.

She developed this into a game. When she feels judged by someone, she will say to herself, "I accept your challenge". Then she will congratulate herself for responding differently and recognise that practising is an important part of getting it right.

We discussed how this strategy could bring her expectation of herself into line with what she expects from everyone else. She had a realisation that she had always sought to play down her abilities so as not to make other people feel uncomfortable. Being taller than a lot of people, she always sought to find a lower position so as not to intimidate others.

I was struck by a Marianne Williamson quote, which I offered to her:

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate, our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure."

Stepping into "New Me"

We continued to monitor how she was showing up in the world with her new self. There were some successes in the workplace and some challenges. At one point, she recognised having "one foot in the old – frustrating things that don't work for me and one foot in the new – things that do work for me". This was causing her to feel like she was on an emotional rollercoaster with big mood swings.

She described this; "the Old Me position always worries what people think of me. Old Me views every event from others perspective as a reflection on my worth. Everything that happens I always measure against how worthy they think I am. My reaction to this was always inward. I am starting to react outward but I'm still not where I need to be". She expressed a desire to stop judging herself and to step back, see things objectively and not always her fault.

We carried out a Perceptual Positions exercise, which is designed to enable a client explore perspectives of their worldview. The exercise involves the client stepping into different positions in turn.

Firstly, she felt into the position of Old Me. I asked her to describe her body language and how it feels to be in this position.

"My shoulders are heavy and slumped. I am making myself smaller and inoffensive."

I asked her if any phrases come to mind:

“I don’t know. I can’t make decisions, I don’t know what to do. I can’t. This is too much. When will this end? Why me? Everything is always up to me. No one ever helps. I’m not good enough. I feel alone. Not living up to potential – failure. I can’t take any more. I need a rest. I need sleep. Lots and lots of sleep. It’s about... having to get through things, using all my energy to get through things rather than being inspired and motivated to get things done. Unfair”.

“No wonder I used to feel like shit...”

I asked her to imagine that New Me was within her presence and if there was anything she wanted to say.

“This way hasn’t worked, we need to find a new way. I don’t want to feel like this anymore.”

She felt into the position of New Me and described her body language and feelings.

“Open, tall, wide, shoulders back. Unafraid. No barriers. Playful. Hopeful. Expectant, excited, experimental, let go, enjoy. New people. Lots of people; enjoying lots of people. Waterproof... when things come in instead of latching on they wash off and don’t affect me. Endless possibilities and therefore achievement of potential. Happy. Objective.”

New Me phrases:

“I’ll give it a go. Let’s see what happens. Something good will come of this. How can I make this better? I’m getting what I deserve. No matter what other people think, I know I’m worthy. I’m confident in my convictions. I can express what I need and want. Non-judgemental of myself and others and accepting of situations.”

Is there anything that New Me would like to say to Old Me?

“It will all be all right. Stop judging yourself and letting it wear you down. Then you will be lighter and you can fly.”

The third position in the exercise is one of an objective observer who has witnessed the interaction. I asked her if she would like to step into this role.

She imagined herself like an Angel watching over.

Without any prompting, she described her feelings from this position:

“I am feeling love towards the Old Me, so worn down. I know from here that everything is all right and I am all right. Old Me is the opposite of waterproof – like a manky old sponge, heavy and bedraggled. I am feeling love for how much good I can bring to myself and others now because I am free.”

She embraced both aspects of herself and reflected on our talk of acceptance in the first session. She feels she has achieved this now.

“I’d used my life story as a way of defining how I would react to things and who I am. You can be whoever you want to be whenever you want to be rather than having to be like that. The way you have come to be at the point where you are now doesn’t define who you are. It may have

caused what happened but it doesn't define you. All the things that happen don't define who you are, accept that it's happened – YOU are bigger than that.”

“I can now accept and feel loving towards what has happened – I don't have to take it all forward. Like when packing for a trip, I don't have to take all the old clothes that don't fit me anymore – I can buy new clothes because they are nice and they suit the journey.”

She considered a strategy to bring into her life when she is caught in the space between Old Me and New Me. She can take a moment to ask herself, “what would the sponge do and what would the umbrella do?” She can be the Angel and ask herself; “what would Old Me think, what would they do? What would New Me think and do?”

TESTING

Over the next few sessions, we reflected upon situations at work and in the family. New Me had developed a different coping strategy to deal with stressful situations. She was learning to stand back and let others take responsibility rather than jumping in to make sure everything got done. At times, she would question herself whether or not she was doing her job. She would find herself struggling to step back but she allowed things to unfold and found that satisfactory outcomes would emerge.

Situations happened where she had to express her emotions and ask for needs to be met. She is beginning to be able to understand and express her emotions quicker. Although the new way is often still a challenge, she feels like she knows what to do. She recognises that the more she responds in the new way, the more natural it will become.

There were even times when she would choose to act like Old Me; to take responsibility rather than allowing others. But we recognised that in coping with these situations, she was doing this from a New Me position.

THE OUTCOME

To finish off the work, we came back to the place of exploring her purpose in life.

The Gift

I asked her if she thought she may have a gift to offer the world and what that might be. At first there was some resistance to the concept of having a gift but she kept an open mind and proceeded to explore.

She reflected upon how people always seem to open up to her and what this means. She recognised she has an ability to pick up on other's feelings and needs and is able to respond by putting them at ease. She is good at conflict resolution and making people feel safe. She can frame information in a way that is simple and clear for people to understand.

She exclaimed that she couldn't understand the contribution or use of this ability.

I had trouble hiding my surprise at this statement! I reflected this back to her in the hope that she could hear it in a different way.

We explored her not understanding the contribution and use of her ability. It became apparent that she believed this because there was no tangible measure of the results, like there was at grammar school. However, she recognised that her goals are very different now and we explored other ways she could measure the results; monitoring her feelings and counting the connections made with other people.

The Vision

Next, we worked on developing a vision for how she wants her Future Self to be.

We approached this through a series of testimonial exercises to her future self on different aspects of her life. From these testimonials, she developed a personal mission statement. This came from a deep and instinctual place and is something that will be a reminder of what she has to offer. The statement will keep her motivated and moving forward into the future self she has envisioned.

“I have lived to tell the tale and now I light the way for others. I am everything, all at once and separately. I am a tornado that multiplies experiences to make something bigger, more profound, more effective, more enjoyable and more whole. When I reach a new layer of the onion, I bravely venture through it with conscious understanding.”

It seems that Bambi is growing into the Alpha Doe.

I am always inspired by my clients and feel privileged to take up an intimate role in their lives. Coaching at its most profound feels like having a front-row seat to witness the emergence of realisations and recognitions leading to transformation.

One the subject of Identity, I'm going to close using the client's own words:

“The way you have come to be at the point where you are now doesn't define who you are. It may have caused what happened but it doesn't define you. All the things that happen don't define who you are, accept that it's happened – YOU are bigger than that.”

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