



Jo Cheesman

Emergence

My coaching journey began in Namibia.

I was on a leadership programme as part of a Government Department accelerated leadership scheme. For a month, we had the privilege of learning alongside the Himba tribe, building a playground to entice children to school, and assisting the Namibian Government in tracking rhino by day, and by night, counting nocturnal animals visiting a watering hole. I was sitting under the shade of the baobab trees when I first experienced being coached. The scheme leader, my coach that day, sat opposite me; her wooden chair facing mine.

I remember the air was hot and the voices distant. And I remember that as our session began, my surroundings blurred and expanded around me. It was as though boundaries were dissipating and space was filling its place. Her questions helped me enquire into my challenges, nudging insights, as she listened with curiosity. I recall the intoxicating feeling of being given time to explore what was important to me, aided by the undivided attention of my coach.

It was this seminal experience of being a client that led me to want to be a coach. It left an indelible mark. Being coached, shaped my personal and professional trajectory from that moment on. It's hard to believe that this was over 20 years ago and that the winding path of my coaching practice has led me to engage in a transdisciplinary doctorate in professional practice (coaching).

Henri Bergson, the French philosopher, wrote 'reality has appeared to us as a perpetual becoming'. How, then, to capture on paper the experience of becoming in my development as a coach and how I've arrived at this point? I am trying to put into words something ethereal, while at the same time actively creating it.

It unfolds as I journey, unending. And my journey has involved as much unbecoming as it has, becoming; as much learning to 'be', as 'coming to be'. For all that I've learnt about coaching techniques and approaches, I've also learnt to hold these lightly; to relinquish my determination to achieve a goal or outcome, to allow emergence for those with whom I work. Becoming has involved trusting more in my ability to be with the uncertainty of transitional moments and that clarity will come and experimenting to allow creativity to flourish.

Looking back, my career choices were always concerned with 'bettering', either in the corporate or public sector, mostly in large, complex organisations – management consulting, NHS, an international NGO, and a Government Department. I most enjoyed the roles that brought together people, resources and issues, that created possibilities where there had been devastation. I worked on high-tempo operations to determine the UK response to global humanitarian crises and international deployments and advise Ministers, in collaboration with

others, including the Cabinet Office, Treasury, FCDO.

That day in Namibia, as I experienced the impact of coaching for the first time, a realisation dawned in me of its transformative power. From then on, I purposely manoeuvred myself into positions where I could learn how to bring a coaching approach to my work. I qualified as a trainer and coach, worked on major organisational change programmes and leadership initiatives. Supporting and assessing others on their coaching education programmes became another leap in development. My ever-present purpose guides in moments of indecision. I've always been fascinated by learning and transformation, driven by a positive social impact, curious to explore life's existential questions, and how we can collectively contribute to a better world.

Throughout, I have sought the experiential learning I needed to hone my skills. Through coaching training, I came to understand how my background, skills, beliefs and experience inform my signature presence. Each of our signatures is unique, of course. Development of our approaches is a never-ending craft; at its essence, they are the same, but they shift with each new influence, learning and encounter. I learnt, and still do, through hours of dialogue with my cohort, tutors and others, and hours of study, application, experimentation, supervision, and critical reflection. I created my approach from a host of coaching philosophies, methods and approaches.

As much as we learn from formal training, what I find intriguing is what happens to our learning during the in-between times. The intensity of some of these experiences has grown my strength in integrating darkness, both within myself and those with whom I work. As a military family, we have lived with danger, uncertainty and separation, familiar with loss, grief, life-changing injuries and death. My co-coach reminds me that the answer lies in facing this discomfort, to ask what it's telling me in the silence. Working deeply refines my skills of enquiry with others. I instinctively feel this embodied wisdom. This gives me the strength to hold the space for others so we can inquire into the dark places and explore the paradoxes together. In that way, shifts occur.

I rely on critical reflection to build self-awareness. It has always been an essential part of my development. Patterns emerge, insights, meaning. I seek out transitional places - hotels, art galleries, train stations - as they allow anonymity, freedom from expectations, censorship and judgement. Meditation in movement - running, stand-up paddle boarding, flow yoga - has a similar effect. Reflection is my route inwards which builds my muscles of reflexivity, enhancing my ability to be present and allowing my intuition to guide me. There's always more work for me to do. Ultimately, coaching is, for me, reflective and happens in a liminal learning space. As coaches we talk of 'holding the space' for others - the emotional, spiritual, embodied space - contained by almost imperceptible boundaries of time, confidentiality and ethics. We co-create the conditions for change; for the emergence of something that we were not aware of at the outset, the possibility of a different way of being and relating. The moment of epiphany, of illuminating the ways to see and make sense of a situation differently, seems to me to be where the magic of coaching lies.

I have always been curious about how much of myself I bring to each coaching session. Early on in my practice, I experimented with remaining objective, trying not to influence others with my own way of being and worldview, while simultaneously conceding that I cannot and would not wish to eliminate myself from the relationship. Holding this tension without resolution, this embeddedness becomes a creative act, a dance. The most profound shifts often come from those relational insights gained from interactions and exchanges as beings-in-the-world. This embedded approach calls for boldness and challenge.

This challenge includes widening our vision. I remember the moment I felt a sudden, cold liquid wave of panic wash over me as I realised that we would be leaving our children in a world facing some of the greatest challenges in human history. I am gripped by an urgency to make a contribution. Engaging in a doctorate is my way of navigating the complexity of the ever-changing landscape in which we find ourselves. I am seeking to better understand how my enquiry and research can practically benefit others, including the coaching community, to

inform our work with leaders and organisations to create positive impact.

I am curious to explore ways in which we can change climates, particularly in the areas of climate change and biodiversity loss, both collectively and individually, making systemic shifts, as much as urgent actions. Changing climates begins with my agency in a unique context, appreciating that we can each influence the environments we encounter. Embracing a transdisciplinary research approach requires us to genuinely shift our paradigms, to transcend disciplinary boundaries and honour all perspectives. Our attention to language and power dynamics is key. It calls on us to have a systemic, interconnected view of the world and collaborate creatively to make a positive difference. I draw inspiration from the natural world and from others – coaches, philosophers, thinkers, naturalists – and enjoy experiencing the work of musical performers who experiment collaboratively, enriching my journey. All the influences converge. Becoming transdisciplinary feels like my own act of emergence.

So many have generously shared their wisdom on my path of becoming and unbecoming; their nurture, support and challenge is part of my story. Within my narrative are threads of gratitude. The Critical Coaching Group and its 'Becoming' project is an eye-opening endeavour that invites each of us to be vulnerable to see what might flourish.