



“The beast within”

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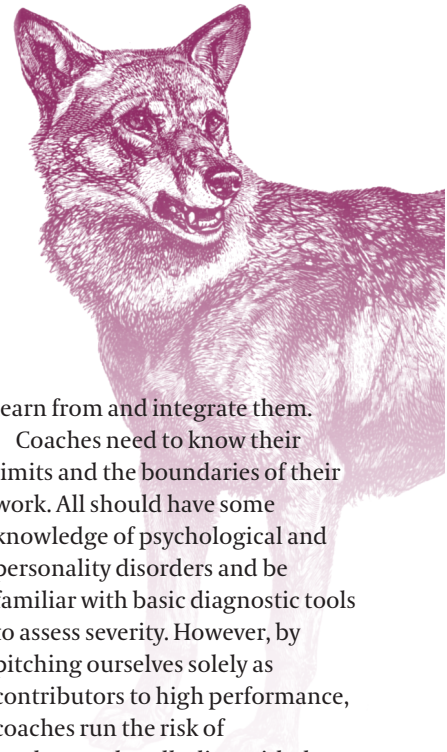
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THE BEAST WITHIN

In these times of economic and environmental crisis, how do coaches encourage the imagination, vision and grounded optimism needed to plant the seeds of recovery? **Hetty Einzig** investigates



Over the past year I have often told the story of the Cherokee elder and the wolves.

You probably know it. He tells some children of a terrible fight within him between two wolves: one represents his fear, envy, competitiveness and greed, the other, his joy, hope, care and compassion.

"It's a terrible battle", he says, "and this same fight is going on inside every one of you."

"Grandfather", asks one of the children, "which wolf will win?" The old Cherokee replies: "The one I feed."

The story¹ reminds us powerfully that choices are made and remade constantly for, just like our bodies, our hearts and spirit need regular nourishment.

Coaching is all about cultivating awareness and responsibility – enabling our clients to make informed, conscious choices, take actions and be accountable for the paths chosen. This requires a positive outlook and hope. But if the client is to be encouraged to feed the benign wolf, what happens to the wolf of our less appealing side? Is the beast within to be starved to death; sent into the wilderness, become the proverbial scapegoat; ignored, ridiculed or shamed into submission? Are these even viable? Surely not.

The Shadow

Depending on how narrow the definition, between a sixth and a quarter of people in the UK are depressed or chronically anxious.

Around 13 million working days are lost a year from depression in the UK; the CBI's latest figures show that £17 billion per annum is lost to business through sick leave and absenteeism² and the World Health Organization estimates that depression will be the number one world health problem by 2020 (from its current fourth place)³.

As global crises mount – environmental, economic, human

learn from and integrate them.

Coaches need to know their limits and the boundaries of their work. All should have some knowledge of psychological and personality disorders and be familiar with basic diagnostic tools to assess severity. However, by pitching ourselves solely as contributors to high performance, coaches run the risk of inadvertently colluding with the 'tyranny of the positive' that reigns in many large corporations, where anything negative is repressed or punished. This can lead to extreme examples of unconscious mass

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– anxiety and distress will become increasingly common.

Talking openly and authentically about feeling depressed or anxious, of losing interest and pleasure in life, of our despair at the state of the world, is not generally welcomed. We dissemble instead: "Fine", is the expected response to "How are you?"

Those who feel anything but fine simply conform. Ours is a cut-it-out or fix-it society. Indigenous cultures, by contrast, have different views of illness or emotional distress, seeking to

denial and corporate excess – as seen lately in the banking sector.

Coaches are used to asking "What if?" questions. So what if we took a different view of depression, sadness and fear from the polarised and pathologising view of the Western medical model?

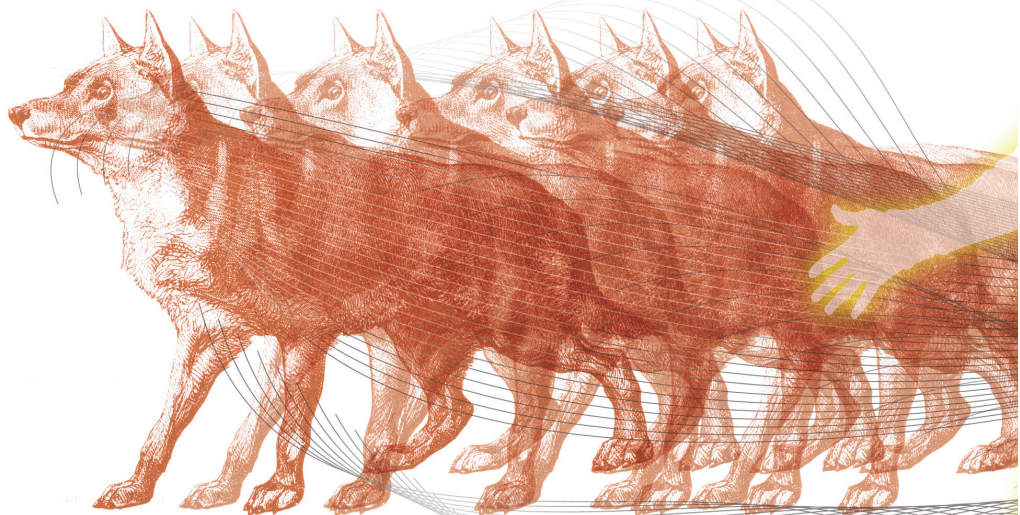
What if we turned on its head our cultural tendency to favour light and see darkness as the repository of all that is fearsome and bad? What if the answers we seek lay in the darkness?

As Dante puts it: "In the middle of my life's road I found myself in the

dark wood where the way was totally lost.”

What follows is his famous journey to rediscover his sense of meaning and purpose in life. Two vital points: first, he didn’t panic or avoid the journey into darkness; second, he had a coach and guide in the poet Virgil.

In modern industrial cultures, distress is the specialist province of counsellors or psychotherapists. In business, seeking help is often considered weak or needy.



“Now is the time to address the dark wolf and to cultivate compassion, care and kindness that loosens its grip”

We coaches avoid talk of anxiety or failure, focusing instead on helping clients muster strengths, master ‘challenges’ and manage ‘development areas’.

An army general turned coach reminded me that the good soldier is not the fearless soldier: fearless can be reckless. Truly courageous people know the fearful part of themselves, and accept and manage their fear as they choose the right path. The same goes for the other negative parts of ourselves – envy, hatred, feelings of uselessness, vulnerability and despair. The dark is as much ours as the light.

Speaking at a dark time of total war in Europe, Carl Jung’s comments on the shadow ring true today:

“... a man [who withdraws his projections] knows that whatever is wrong in the world is in himself, and if he only learns to deal with his own Shadow he has done something real for the world. He has succeeded in shouldering at least an infinitesimal part of the gigantic, unsolved social problems of our day.”

And he added: “One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious. The latter procedure, however, is disagreeable and therefore not popular.”²

Making way for new birth

We are living at a time when fear is very near the surface – in organisations and in ourselves. To deny or dismiss the wolf of terror will only encourage it to burrow deeper. In my work with global corporates I see the dysfunctional expressions of anxiety increasing: disaffection, cynicism, aggression, paranoia and narcissistic behaviour, eg, micro-managing, bullying and false grandeur, or ‘bigging’ oneself up at the expense of others.³

Now is the time to address the dark wolf and to cultivate compassion, care and kindness – for oneself and for others – that helps loosen its grip. This process, of looking fear in the face, of mindfulness and compassion, generates the clear thinking and

creativity so needed in challenging times. I liken it to spring cleaning: both invariably bring a surge of creative energy and optimism and an authentic re-engagement.

In transpersonal coaching we work with our clients to reframe pain, failure and crises. Seeing them as an integral part of growth, of the purposeful unfolding of our life journey, and providing the gift of learning – not a result of personal lack or inadequacy – transforms their meaning.

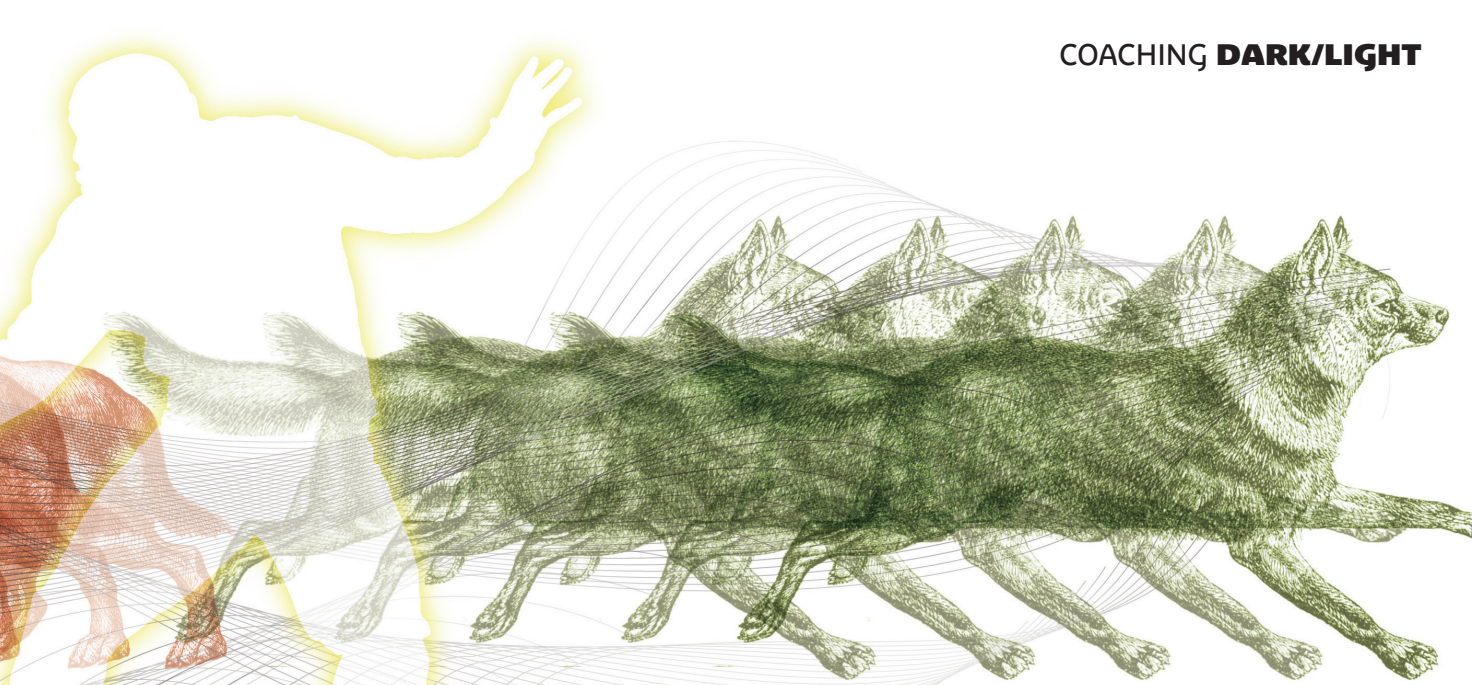
Working with clients in crisis coaches can aid this paradigm shift by holding the following questions in mind:

- What is its purpose?
- What potential is trying to emerge?
- What creative possibility is hidden within?
- What is trying to be born?

Typically, the client’s starting point is often some or all of the following: denial, self-pity, avoidance, anger, resistance, rebellion, paralysis.

Underlying this is the unspoken: why me? Without rushing to soothe, we can encourage clients to entertain a perspective that helps them move from being victims to finding meaning:

- What does this mean for me, for



us, for the organisation?

- What needs to change here?
- What needs to happen?
- What is the next step?
- What is trying to emerge or unfold?
- What is the bigger picture?

I often set the field for this shift in consciousness by asking clients what they feel grateful for in their lives right now. This encourages a more open-hearted engagement with what is painful or not working.

Later in the process, when emotions have calmed somewhat, I might also ask:

- What do you see if you look down on this situation from the balcony, or from a helicopter?
- What would the wisest person you know advise right now?
- If this situation was sent just for your learning, what would that learning be?

These kinds of questions help clients see their personal problems in context. They gain a more holistic view and access their own 'wise being', who knows there is no failure, only learning.

We cannot always change our outer circumstances, but we can always change our inner responses. Facing our pain with stillness, acceptance and compassion, we can

then choose the value we ascribe to it, creating sense and a marker in our personal journey; we can opt to use this experience to learn and grow, to deepen our understanding of ourselves and of life.

It's not all about you!

An understanding of systems – how everything is interconnected and depends for its health on everything else and how each affects the other in a constant feedback loop – also helps us work through the darker aspects of ourselves, and the pain within life.

The opportunity for coaches to approach their work systemically is unique in the helping professions in that the coach-client relationship is by its nature systemic, tending to involve at the least a line manager. The coach is primed to go beyond the dualism of problem-solution and beyond the intra-psychic model, which spotlights the individual.

Anglo-American culture teaches us to be egotistical. It favours the strong and the independent; it rewards the self-sufficient and the assertively goal-oriented. By contrast, what our world needs now is people who think broadly, understand human fragility in the face of the breakdown of global systems, can forgo self gratification

for the sake of others, who understand interdependence, are skilled in teamwork and take action as members of organisations, communities and society. A good leader is a good citizen.

We need to become much more self-aware – plumbing our strengths, potential and our darkness. At the same time we must resist our inherent narcissism, which favours self-absorption and self-importance, and turn our vision outwards in service to a wider purpose.

I am minded of the African proverb: "If you want to travel fast, go alone. If you want to travel far, go together". At this time we need to travel both fast and far.⁴ We need our darkness and our light. ■

References and further info

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