

We don't describe the world we see: We see the world we describe - ... On Juggling, Patchwork Quilts, Coaching & Work

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SHORT VERSION – March 08

Summary

Increasingly the business world recognises the necessity of moving from silo thinking to interconnected thinking and behaviours. But until we apply this to ourselves and our lives as a whole this systems thinking will not take root as a mindset from which behaviours spring naturally. Transpersonal Coaching can help people make this shift..

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In my teens I used to make patchwork. Even then it was not a trendy hobby. But I enjoyed the quiet activity of matching and contrasting colours and patterns, of joining them carefully together with meticulous, tiny purple silk stitches, to make a pleasing creation greater than the sum of its parts. This right brain pastime was a useful contrast to the angst ridden teenage life and essay deadlines. I made cushion covers – it crossed my mind to make a quilt but such ambition didn't fit my youthful impatience. Now, decades later, I believe I have achieved my patchwork quilt...

Let me explain. I do not sit of an evening carefully sewing fabric fragments together. I lead a busy life as a coach working with executives and teams. I am a mother of teenage children; I run a household and also spend substantial time developing charitable projects...and so on. Like many lives today. It used to seem impossible to reconcile these many parts of my life. But now I can see the connections, the purple thread that joins it all together into a whole - complex, disparate but with a recognisable pattern – like a patchwork quilt.

Increasingly I find it is a metaphor I reach for when coaching women and sometimes men, who similarly lead very busy, very full, very varied and usually pressured lives. My aim is to help them reframe what they feel to be haphazard and stressful lives, in order for them to take back creative control. The image is often transformative.

Research tells us (refs.) that the language we use determines the way we see the world. As Joseph Jaworski, author on leadership, says “We don't describe the world we see; we see the world we describe”. How we talk about our work and life, the stories we tell and the images we hold determine our feelings, behaviours and the choices we make. The images that get enshrined in our language create the world we live in.

Stories build images that lodge deeply to shape our mind maps. They are not just ‘nice to have’, the cherry on the cake, after the real work of facts and figures has been done. They are fundamental to success, our health, even our survival. In the 1970's anthropologist Fred Polak studied indigenous peoples around the world seeking to understand why some cultures survived the guns, disease and alcohol of Western invaders and others did not (ref.xxx). He found that the key factor was the potency of the future-story held collectively by the tribe. A story full of engaging images of hope and endeavour ensured survival; the absence of an inspirational future-story spelt disaffection and despair.

Images have a motive force that works at deep and unconscious levels: we respond with mind, body, spirit and emotions. In transpersonal coaching we deliberately use this power of images to help

clients bring about the changes they need. For example to cultivate a personal quality a client might want more of – calm, assertiveness, clarity. When the client associates the quality with a strong and personally meaningful image (a lapping sea, rock climbing, a clear glass of water are ones clients of mine have conjured for those qualities) then the feelings, thoughts, bodily sensations are easier to capture and the consequent behavioural changes follow more naturally. Guided imagery is used frequently to help a client envision a scene they want to bring about, or an ‘ideal model’ – the person they want to be.

Mind Pictures

So what are the images that encapsulate our stories of how we work today? As we now inhabit a faster-faster world (ref) and as part-time and complex work arrangements are now common one image that crops up regularly is that of juggling. With a mixture of pride and resignation, people talk of keeping all the balls in the air, of juggling different responsibilities. Or is it desperation? One client, a working mother, described it like this “ I rush from one thing to another, keeping the plates spinning. I feel I can’t get into depth with any one activity because I have my eye on the clock for the next appointment or collecting one of the children from something.”

While the juggling image might initially have been intended to imply the skilful art of multi-tasking, it is now associated for many with the stressful task of managing a diverse, complex, over-full life. A financial director talked of the paralysis he now felt in the job he had once loved. “Everyone comes to me for advice, for the ok on things – even things I know nothing about. I seem to be expected to keep all these balls up in the air, to do a bit here, a bit there, to be involved in everything. I’ve got to the point where I can’t read work stuff anymore; I’m just blanking out.”

It is an irony often noted that the more connected we are – with computers, mobile, blackberry, i-phone – the more alone and fragmented we feel. Juggling is something done solo; it is not a team activity. So it fosters the abiding sense that it all depends on me, on my ability to keep all the balls in the air, that no help is at hand - the lone ranger approach.

Most importantly the image of juggling cannot be disassociated from its implicit corollary of ‘dropping the ball’ – the phrase is its twin. Another working mother commented “You know I am constantly fearful that I will drop a ball at any moment – there are so many different things to think about. I once forgot to pick Tom up from kids club because I got engrossed in a meeting at work. They called me – I was mortified, I felt so guilty. It still haunts me.”

The more we use the image of juggling the more we buy into a picture of our lives in tension, poised only through great dexterity. The focus is on the skill of throwing and keeping things in the air. Each ball is given a moment in space, each plate a spin – and on to the next thing. There is little room for depth, for reflection, for refining any one element. No time in our lives for what the US company, Gore, calls ‘dabble time’ when the creative juices are allowed to play. Always at the back of our minds is the understanding that each ball or plate must give way to the next. And when do the balls come to rest? Juggling by its nature is a temporary trick, a transitory display.

It can feel that a dropped ball could happen at any moment, no matter how well organised one is. Disaster lurks in the wings. The attendant anxiety is for some people a chronic state of affairs. This does not just apply to mothers. One successful, young female client (with no children) commented that she woke every weekday morning “with a start and my head immediately buzzes with all I have to do and all that could go wrong – did I check this; did I let so and so know that; did I tell my secretary to... what about...I mustn’t forget to...I just seem to feel anxious all the time. I’ve come to hate Monday mornings.”

It is still true that the world of work is a landscape created by men, that women manage a greater range of elements in their lives, and that they face greater challenges in navigating this territory (ref). Some flourish, others fall at hurdles along their journey (ref). Despite evidence that Fortune 500 companies with 3 or more women on the board achieve an 83% higher return on equity on average than those with minimal female representation many companies still see women as a problem to be managed rather than an asset (ref).

It is now a commonplace that women's natural, aculturated or genetic tendency to care and therefore be alert to threats to their family's wellbeing makes them 'natural worriers'. Maybe so. Maybe trying to succeed in an environment shaped to male styles of working designed in an era when women took care of the home fuels their anxiety. Maybe being undervalued by the culture of work when the statistics so manifestly tell a different story (girls outperform boys at school; 60% of EU graduates are women.) is a little crazy-making.

Given this work environment the concept of juggling can only exacerbate anxiety. The expectation women have now introjected as the norm is that we manage a home and work, that we have satisfying careers and happy, bright children, that we take care of our bodies, keep fit, look beautiful, well groomed, well coiffed and can cook, advise on the physics homework and project manage the bathroom refit, as well as develop ourselves, our talents and our spirit. Many commentators rail at this list of expectations (refs) blaming a variety of offenders – men, women themselves, advertising, the consumer society, government policy.

My interest here is not to suggest women shouldn't aim for rich and complex lives. But the compartmentalisation that our contemporary Western society demands, along with widespread high expectations of perfection in every sphere may not suit the female, or even the male, psyche. My proposition is that more connected images, stories of interconnectedness, mind-pictures which emphasise the links and which imply working with others, can create something more positive and whole and may lead us to live more satisfying, more meaningful, more productive and less stressful lives.

The Patchwork Quilt

When I offer the image of the patchwork quilt to a client to consider I am not primarily suggesting they change what they do (although individual choices do follow). I am inviting a change in the way she or he thinks about themselves, their life and their work and the unexamined assumptions that underlie these.

The image of the patchwork quilt is an image of integration,. Interestingly, when we talk of 'patchwork provision' (eg. in terms of services) we mean a bit here and a bit there, none of it linked up. However when we visualise a patchwork quilt, this disparateness is resolved. The quilt brings together these scraps, bound together by a consistent thread, into a coherent whole, – more than that, into a work of craft or art.

Recently a lawyer sought coaching to help her move from what she felt was a cul de sac at work into something more satisfying. She told her story. As the elements stacked up – achieved legal work, participation in a number of committees at work, a keen involvement in the firm's CPD programme, a contribution to a couple of major social justice charities, a daughter, creative pursuits – and she indicated how she had brought many of her activities to a point of completion, I was again minded of the patchwork quilt. Her expressed concern was that she was involved in too much, had over diversified, 'following her heart', to the detriment of her 'career'. The warning from a disapproving senior male partner that she 'should stick at one thing if she wanted to be successful and make senior partnership' had made an impression. What should she focus on going forward? Should she leave

the firm since she felt bored and at a dead end, or stick with it for status and advancement? What about her daughter who was growing up fast?...

Talking with her about the patchwork quilt metaphor it became clearer to her how things fitted together, what the major themes were in her life, what she loved doing, and what she wanted more of. This was not a quick fix - it didn't allay the anxiety she felt around not sticking to the single career trajectory model. But the image gave her a different way of conceptualising her life and importantly, a different pattern, one of equal potency, to set against the male career pattern. She could use this to plan her next steps in a creative rather than reactive way.

Much has been written about the 'glass ceiling' women encounter in the workplace. Recently Alice Eagly and Linda Carli have proposed the image of the labyrinth to better describe the twists and turns women have to navigate all the way through their work trajectory with fall off at every corner and every level. "Metaphors matter because they are part of the storytelling that can compel change. Believing in the existence of a glass ceiling, people emphasize certain kinds of intervention...If we want to make better progress, it's time to rename the challenge." (p.64 Eagly & Carli 2007)

Yes metaphors matter and yes, naming the problem is an important part of change. But while both glass ceiling and labyrinth are helpful images because they are strong enough to crystallise and explain women's experience with work, they are diagnostic in nature. They help us define the problem but don't offer a way towards a solution. What seems to appeal to the women I talk to about the patchwork quilt is that it is an image that suggests how we might re-think the shaping of our life and work not just lament their inadequacies. The patchwork quilt demands an active engaging from each of us to reflect on our work, to perceive the patterns, to understand them, value them and then make choices going forward in the light of this understanding. But prior to any mind work the patchwork quilt calls to our non-verbal perception of shape, rhythm, pattern and colour.

"The real act of discovery consists not in finding new lands but seeing with new eyes." Marcel Proust

During the period when my children were too old to have child care (or at least didn't want it) but too young to be left to their own devices I was also working hard developing my coaching work. I was often away from home so the time I was there I wanted to be with my daughters: pick them up from school, take them to their after-school activities, help with homework and cook dinner for us all. And I had to catch up on emails, written work and the myriad things that need doing in a house. It was full on and I felt rushed and stretched thin. I would cut everything fine, rushing out the house to collect my youngest from school with only 10 minutes to drive a 20 minute journey – panicked and thinking of the calls I still had to make, the emails not yet done, the report overdue and then resentful of the deity that had just not granted enough hours in the day. Recognise the picture?

I felt and talked about juggling and did indeed constantly drop balls – with all the distress and guilt this entailed. It was not until much later that I began to re-frame the way I saw my life. So, what if, instead of seeing a string of tasks, an impossible number of balls to juggle, I were to conceive of each activity as a small creative act: a good listening, a conversation with a stranger; collecting my daughter from school; laying the table with attention; cooking a meal; a meeting with a colleague; completing a report....If you approach each action in life with mindfulness and a sense of significance then they become significant.

Howard Gardner says in *Changing Minds* 'a key to changing a mind is to produce a shift in the individual's "mental representations" – the particular way in which a person perceives, codes, retains and accesses information.' (p.5, 2006). So rather than dwell on how hard our lives are, how ridden with conflicting demands and how inadequate we feel to the task of 'juggling the balls', the

patchwork quilt image helps us see our lives as a creative process leading towards an existence that has sense and purpose. It puts us into the position of being the ‘artist’ or craftsman rather than tossed and turned by fate or the demands of others.

Images really do change minds, and consequently behaviour. The underpinning of coaching is to raise awareness (of self, others, our environment, the issues...) and to evoke personal responsibility. The patchwork quilt obliges us to make choices, and to act with attention and with care. Because we become acutely aware that every choice connects with something else, has implications we might not immediately see and an impact on the whole, it obliges us to take responsibility for creating a work of art.

What we are talking about is a system. Scientists, especially those who study the newer sciences – chaos, complexity, string, field and other systems theories – talk about beauty far more often than artists. Systems have pattern, both overt and implicate, they have both order and are organically unpredictable, they can be observed but are also mysterious. We are all of us part of many systems, and we are ourselves the most miraculous system of all, including feedback loops, tipping points and synergies.

Looking Back going forward

Seeing our life in this way, encapsulated in the patchwork quilt, is the opposite of a laissez faire approach but not so pre-determined as creating a plan. In business terms, compare it to the difference between planned strategy and emergent strategy. Yes, we most of us set out with ideas of what we want to do in life, what job or career we wish to pursue – a plan of sorts. And then life presents us with unanticipated opportunities and challenges along the way. What we choose to do at these points – for example whether we manage to integrate these new turns into our life or turn off our current path to take a new route altogether – will determine our sense of who we are. Our identity is not a fixed thing but morphing as we engage with the demands of our journey.

In the same way with a patchwork quilt we may start with a design, an idea of the shape and theme of our quilt but by definition the materials we have to get going is a haphazard pile of scraps, some chosen, some inherited, some found, and some that have just turned up. Our task is then to bring these individual pieces – some gems, some quite ordinary – into a harmonious whole. And just as with emergent strategy, the results may or may not adhere closely to the original plan, but echoes of the original thinking, aims, desires and values that initiated the project will be embedded within.

In the coaching session I often find myself helping clients look back at their working lives and recognise the ‘emergent strategy’ – to, in effect, create their patchwork quilt through hindsight, the better to move forwards with purpose. They are enabled to see that what appeared before to be fragmentary, discontinuous or contradictory now finds its echo, its complement or its counterpoint in some other element from a different sphere. Like a piece of music we can discern the principal theme and then note the variations and counterpoints that go to make up a complex work of art.

In a very real sense the patchwork quilt reminds of our history. A piece of fabric is cut from a favourite worn out dress, that dark blue is forever a reminder of the school uniform it comes from, the mauve liberty lawn recalls a dyeing experiment that went wrong, a blouse abandoned... Brenda Bowman comments in Shields’ novel *Happenstance* “What sets quilting apart from other crafts is the built-in shiver of history”. Patchwork can be re-worked. One colleague describes how in the 60’s she made a trendy waistcoat out of her grandmother’s quilt, adapting it to the needs of the time. A continuity of generations is encapsulated and a repetition of themes. Another colleague remembered that her school uniform suddenly re-appeared in the quilt her mother created. “It’s not a thing of great artistic merit but I couldn’t get rid of it. It contains pieces of my past, my childhood”.

The backing cloth acts as the sturdy support for this complex medley of colour. In life too, if we are to be creative we need a framework that enables us to extemporise and take risks. Whatever our backing it provides continuity and security, so our support structures need attention too.

A key point about the patchwork quilt is the interdependence of all the elements. No one piece would draw notice on its own. It is the interplay between the shapes and fabrics and the arrangement of them that matters; it is the whole that lends significance to the parts. And as in all systems theories, move one piece, emphasise one colour, re-arrange the pattern and everything is changed. We still prize independence in our culture, we expect our children to grow strong, leave home and make their own way in the world. But the best businesses, the strongest families, don't work like that – they couldn't. If everyone just did their own thing without regard for the skills and expertise, the needs and wishes, of others the business would soon founder. In the patchwork quilt each piece is different and has a discrete identity but all work together to create something more than the sum of its parts.

It seems to me that at work and in a world just beginning to realise the destruction we have caused through the pursuit of our individual goals, we are badly in need of a discourse which emphasises our common ground rather than our separateness, a discourse that urges us to work together rather than against one another. We live in a visual world. We are tuned to images. Change will happen faster and deeper via the pictures, stories, metaphors and visual arts that permeate our cultures than through political debate or academic treatise. And the images we need today are of integration, not heroic independence, of connectedness not separation, if we are to effectively address the way we work and lead our lives at a personal level and as a species. While we see the elements of our lives as all separate, and while we see ourselves as separate from each other and from the world we live in, then it is not too strong to say that burn out, alienation, loneliness and abuse of others and our world remain commonplace.

The patchwork quilt is one image that could be added to the rich collection now needed to create the new story that we need to tell ourselves. The patchwork speaks of a collective vision of interdependence with others and our Earth, of recycling the old to create new things of beauty, of bringing together fragments to create a whole, of bringing our history into the present and understanding its patterns. It also tells a story of endeavour, of choice rather than muddling on. By understanding and honouring the underlying theme of our 'backing cloth' each of us, and each together with others, can create a world that we want to live in.