

CASE STUDY ESSAY by Leke Adebayo

CLIENT – A gentleman whom we can call ‘John Leafer’. He is about 39 years of age and lives in Wales.

CONTEXT - He is a communications consultant and we were introduced by a mutual friend. He dabbles in amateur/professional dramatics whenever he gets the opportunity. He has suffered serious illnesses for over the last decade. Illnesses that were not just debilitating in themselves but seriously affected his ability as a communications consultant to work effectively (or, at all).

On an emotional level, this has instilled in him anxiety, fear, a reduction in self-esteem and depression. On a practical level, this has caused both personal and professional isolation as well as considerable loss of earned income. Although he is now much better physically than he was a number of years ago, the emotional scars are still prevalent and are never far from the surface. This, coupled with family trauma issues have left him “somewhat damaged” and prone to being perpetually “rejected” (in his own self-description) – a state of affairs that he believes a great number of human beings – not just himself – find themselves in (and will continue to do so).

He has been seeing a therapist for a number of years but (in addition) wants to utilize the services of a coach (albeit one- in-training). I informed him, when we were contracting for the sessions, that I had a “Thrin Track” coaching style (as described in my Reflective Essay): a mixture of exploratory and process all combined in a Thinking and Enabling environment - as per Nancy Kline.

He told me that he liked the sound of that.

PRESENTING ISSUE – John’s illnesses over the last few years have caused him considerable isolation. Now, that he is feeling better, he wants to (as he himself puts it) “to get out there” so he detailed before our first session, a plethora of goals that he wanted to achieve both as a general “bucket list” and (more specifically) in terms of short, medium and long-term objectives. John is clearly a “Renaissance Man” (he acts, writes, reads copiously, helps out in the community as well as being a communications expert) so there are a huge number of things that he wants to do (going forward). It is probably worth reciting some of them here to give proper context.

Top Ten Goals (in no particular order)

1. Visit NYC.
2. Earn £10,000 a month.
3. Buy houses in his area. Do them up and then rent them out.
4. Meet a romantic partner (a lady) and have kids.
5. Carry out more socialising and professional networking.
6. Improve his voice.
7. Travel the world.
8. Save £250,000.
9. Help his community both as a volunteer and through his professional expertise.
10. Be a kinder person – a less angry individual.

Short Term

1. Do voice exercises.

2. Promote/market his skills.
3. Learn monologue.
4. Enquire about acting lessons.
5. Help in the community.
6. Contact professional network for work.

Medium Term

1. Read plays.
2. Start applying for student acting films again.
3. Organise read-through of self-penned play – get a director on board.
4. Organise “pitching” and “selling” training for work.

Long term (next 6 months)

1. Finish draft of novel/script.
2. Start blogging.
3. Update website.
4. Consider a coaching course.
5. Set up a theatre company.
6. Print business cards.

His Challenge

- (Emotional) – the fear and depression associated with his voice issues. Will his voice give way and prevent him from “getting out there” and remaining there?
- (Emotional) – generally, he has always had a fear of rejection. Probably stems from his childhood and family circumstances. The way he has got around this is by shifting his mindset to understand that, although we are all bound for rejection, we must still try and do the best we can. Whilst that works for him, he’s fully aware that possessing such a mindset has unknown consequences.
- (Practical) So many things listed as goals. What should he focus on? What should be the priority?

My feelings about his challenges

As you can imagine, when I was first confronted with his list of goals, his short-terms, medium terms, long-terms, his challenges and counselling issues, the first inkling is to think to oneself: “what have I let myself into?! Specifically, some of my self-talk involved the following :

- There are a lot of issues here (deep and otherwise).
- Is it extra counselling that he needs rather than coaching?
- There seems to be so many disparate parts here. How will I be able to bring the strands together?
- Do the strands need to be brought together?

But, once I had taken some deep and heavy breathes (literal and metaphorical), I tried to dissect what were the essential and over-arching issues:

- Fear,
- rejection,
- interaction/isolation and
- goals and priorities.

As individuals, we all have to deal with such issues in our lives (at one stage or another) and they are and represent essential parts of the human condition.

Our first couple of sessions were interesting because we were probably operating at cross-purposes. Whilst I understood that his past was important to him, I had made an assumption that he simply wanted to (factually) detail incidents in his past, explore them purely for the purposes of my understanding and then fast track to the future with respect to his list of goals. (In mitigation, when I asked him at our first session what issues he would like to begin with, he had highlighted the short term, medium term and long-terms goals).

Wrong!

It was only when we started touching on them that I noticed he would veer from them almost immediately and segue into a story about his family (father, mother and step mother, primarily) or incidents that showed how the world was barbaric or selfish or how a particular individual was treating him without a sense of justice or with equal vocal rights. It was hard to keep track.

The impact on me was remarkable. He would be telling his story, wanting to be heard and I would (genuinely) be listening, exploring by funnelling down and verticalizing but (at the same time) feeling an urge to move the story on and get into next and future steps. If I can be honest, at this stage, I was really struggling to give him unconditional personal regard. I was not fully appreciative then of how his past - encapsulated by his voice issues and other physical ailments (together with his family history) had impacted on him.

I think there were several moments when he would embark on a stream of consciousness about how he had been damaged by his father leaving his mother, how his father had been more interested in the new woman in his life rather than his own emotional needs, how (we, as human beings) are all bound to be rejected etc...etc... and, I could feel my attention wondering in the coaching session.

Why didn't I (transparently) confront him with my thoughts and feelings?

That would have been the honest thing to do but, firstly, it was still very early in our coaching relationship, secondly, I didn't know how to do so in a way that would have been elegant and/or effective and, thirdly, I did not want to destroy any morsel of rapport that we might have built up.

Matters came to a proverbial head at the start of our third session when he mentioned (in very quick succession) three separate topics. 1) a story about a friend who died a few days previously of alcohol poisoning. 2) he mentioned a book called "Healing a Hurting Soul" and the concepts around being the 'Black Sheep' of his family in relation to the book and 3) he described a training course involving a number of fifteen and sixteen year olds and how they bullied one girl on the course. There was no apparent connection (certainly, to me) between the three topics. So, I took a very deep breathe and made the plunge:

Leke (as coach): "John, can I share something with you?"

John (as client): "Of course you can."

Leke: "Well, you've just talked about 3 different issues in the space of about 45 seconds and I'm just trying to understand what might be the connection or significance between them."

PAUSE

John: "Oh, that's just how my mind works and I just say what's on my mind at any particular moment."

Leke: "Ok, great and what might you think is the significance of this?"

John: "Erm...nothing really...it's just that I want to tell my story...I've been isolated for years...and this is how the stories come out.... thick and fast..."

And, that was it.

Simple.

He just wanted to tell his story – to be heard and seen after years of isolation and HOW he told his story was HOW he told his story.

Period.

Full stop.

He wanted to justify his situation, to persuade the coach....me.....anyone...about what he had been through and then he would be able to move on.

For years, all he had been hearing – whether from his family or his own internal voice was that HE had been THE PROBLEM. Here was a chance to tell his own story to (at least) an independent audience.

- We then touched on some theories encapsulated in coaching theory and on the Animas modules, especially Transactional Analysis (Life Stories) – about how our life destinations can be based on past histories imposed and affixed by authority figures in our lives.
- We also discussed Paradigms (around Narratives/Re Authoring/ Re Membering) – about implanted storylines that create a pattern to our lives and how we can change them by certain mental and practical adjustments. A simple method is to expand the parameters of what is possible in our lives by unblocking the self-imposed limitations that we (and people around us) have long instilled.
- Also, we shared further theories in this topic area. That, as human beings, we are not meant to live in isolation. And, John, because of the issues that he went through, recognized this better than most. We should live in community. But, whom you have inside your community will determine the quality of the life that you lead. So, you are free to re-populate one's community and the membership of that community (as you wish):

Do you want to honour or revoke a particular membership? It's up to you.

Upgrade or downgrade a specific membership? That is your choice.

Grant authority to a person or disqualify that person (in relation to your life). You are the boss.

My feelings towards John dramatically changed after this and I have to say I noticed a dramatic shift in him also. Although he would still touch on his internal issues of fear and rejection now and again, it was clear that he now did so in a moderated way. Whilst broaching these issues, he would simultaneously recount the positive things he had done that day/days before/weeks before. I asked

him what methods or techniques he was using to prevent the “internal voice” from overwhelming him. Apart from exercising (street running/lifting weights) and meditating, he said (in reply) a number of very interesting things.

- Firstly, he said, the fear that triggers his “internal voice” was not to be ignored or avoided. He paraphrased a quote from an old movie ‘Dune’ (with the musician ‘Sting’) that fear was like a storm or a wave in a sea. ***“I must not fear. Fear is the mind-killer. I will face my fear. I will let it pass over and through me. And, when it has passed, I will turn the inner eye to see its path. Where it has gone, there will be nothing. Only I will remain.”***
- Secondly, he had taken his therapist’s advice and written (undelivered) letters to his family members. They were very emotional and painful to write but they had proved extremely cathartic, had acted as a form of closure and provided unilateral conciliation (from his vantage point) with respect to his family issues.
- Thirdly, he stated that his journey (with the illnesses and family issues) had similarities to the Kubler Ross stages of grief: 1) Denial 2) Anger 3) Bargaining 4) Depression and, finally, 5) Acceptance/Change. He now fully accepted whom he was and was ready to change and move into a new direction.
- Fourthly, he had learnt to be kinder to himself. Whilst, there is still a chance one will get rejected (he said), there is also a chance that one will be accepted if open to the opportunity.
- Fifthly, he had now amassed around himself a reliable and trusting support system of friends who would help each other out (as and when needed).

At our final session, I told him that I noticed that he seemed even more upbeat and chirpy. He said he felt more resilient and less fear and, whilst he was aware that things could slip back, he was very confident about the future.

Why was he more confident, I asked?

He answered that he felt more equipped to deal with the outside world and that a main instrument in that process – his voice – was now firing on all cylinders.

I smiled to myself: we had (sort of) come full circle. His voice (real and metaphorical) was being heard.