Spirituality and coaching
Coaching, as I see it, is about clients being empowered in the original sense of the word, which includes supporting them in both achieving what is important to them and stepping into their own authority. The influence of the past is acknowledged and space is given for emotions that arise in the course of life. However, the coaching context is less about healing old issues or processing emotions and more about dealing well with your present situation and achieving what you want in the future. This may involve traditional ‘doing’ goals but can also look at how you want to be and feel in the world. All of this involves developing awareness, learning and taking responsibility.

I have been consciously involved with personal and spiritual development since the mid-70s and over the years have explored many spiritual perspectives and paths. Most of my friends have been involved in some form of spirituality and I have been part of the wider Findhorn community since 1994. My own eclectic, spiritual journey is integrated into everything I do but does not have a particular form or methodology. Trying to explain how it comes into coaching can feel a bit like a fish trying to describe why it needs to be in the sea and how that influences the way it is. More generally, it highlights the limitations of words to represent experiences and ways of being that, by their very nature, are beyond words. In some ways for me it is about how you meet and respond to everything that happens in your life. In another way it is about who you are, or are not, beyond and including everything that happens, and then holding both these perspectives as you engage with the world and with clients. As in good therapy, it is about what you bring and are present with as you engage with your client – rather than applying a model to them and limiting them with your own ideas.

Some of my best coaching has taken place when I expanded into the ‘space’ where the coaching was taking place and what needed to happen happened. This is not something that can necessarily be taught, explained or planned. As other coach and therapist friends (with a lot of practical experience) have put it: ‘In the end it is all about the transformative presence of love,’ and that does not mean being indulgent or flaky.

Spirituality in coaching

I started coaching in 1998 and have been training and mentoring coaches since 2001. Since then I have watched the profession establish itself and mature. I have been involved in the development of accreditation and coaching organisations seeking to legitimise, regulate and promote coaching in different areas. As part of the process to define themselves as a unique, serious profession, some coaches have felt the need to distance themselves from anything that might be considered too touchy-feely or ‘woo woo’. This included much of therapy and certainly anything explicitly spiritual. Now the worlds of therapy and coaching are reaching out to one another and showing more mutual appreciation and interest. There are also more coaches willing to acknowledge and work with what might be called spirituality, and the more we do it, the easier and more acceptable it becomes.

A key turning point for me occurred when I was running a week-long coach training with a group who were mainly executives. On the Thursday evening we were out having a celebration meal together and one of the women asked me what my own goals were at that time. With a couple of glasses of wine in me, I said that what I was really working on with my mentor was learning to love better throughout my life. The next day I remember feeling vulnerable and wondering if I had been silly to share this and if I would be judged. On the final day she came up to me and told me that, while the week had been excellent, what had really made a difference was the idea of learning to love...
An important part of my work is to support clients in having that deeper connection to their source or essence, so that they choose goals that truly serve them and can draw on their inner resources and knowing better and that the same evening she had contacted her partner and had a deep connection. Since then I have been much more open and matter-of-fact about sharing the importance of spirituality to me, without either pushing it or hiding it. I have been reflecting on some of the overlapping threads or aspects of how spirituality might be expressed in coaching. These include the coach:

1. operating from and applying an established model or path, such as a Christian perspective or Buddhist teachings and psychology
2. supporting a client explicitly in clarifying and following their chosen path, whether that is a formal religion, faith or spiritual teacher or something more personal and less defined. (A connection with a particular path may be more the remit of a spiritual director or mentor, albeit using a coaching approach)
3. working with what it means for an individual or organisation to live and act in a spiritual way
4. supporting a client to connect with and live from their deeper identity, being and wisdom
5. connecting with and embodying their own deeper identity, being and wisdom as they coach and interact with the client.

Here I will focus mainly on the last three areas and on work with individuals rather than organisations or groups.

Working with what it means to live and act in a spiritual way

This can mean aspiring to a set of accepted values or principles or it can be more general and personal. Mostly I will work from the person’s own words and focus, and be led by them. We may explore what they need to feel connected and the different ways they can express their spirituality. This can include getting their spiritual needs met, such as:

- gratitude/celebration
- prayer/meditation/quiet connecting time
- connecting with nature
- inspiration, meaning and purpose
- practising kindness and generosity of spirit.

It can also help to look at some of the everyday things they can do such as:

- perform a kindness and tell no one
- eat slowly and mindfully
- keep a gratitude journal
- follow your intuition
- meditate or pray for 20 minutes
- focus on a value for the day
- read from an inspirational source
- speak well of people
- spend some time in nature
- send positive thoughts to someone
- ask for guidance about something
- connect with your inner wisdom.

It is important that lists like these are used as starting points, and that the client generates their own ideas or adapts these to fit their own situation.

The same is true if they want to work with ‘what they are here to do in the world’ and how they will make a contribution. Here I may introduce the concepts of values and purpose as ideas or tools to support them. Some coaches ask clients to tick off their values from a given list and then work with these, without much further investigation. I prefer not to make assumptions and to discuss with clients what these concepts mean to them. I am more interested in how the client connects with their inner wisdom and resources to clarify what is important for them and gives them meaning. Then any words or phrases they come up with as ‘values’ or their ‘purpose’ become reminders of that connection and what is important to them, rather than being fixed, finished with and now known. This emphasis links in to the next aspect.

Supporting the client to connect with their deeper identity, being and wisdom

Whatever the client calls ‘their source’, we can support them in being more connected with it and in operating and making choices from there more in their lives. This frequently goes with loving themselves unconditionally and opening themselves to ‘something greater’. This is the ‘being’ aspect that informs what they choose to do and how they do it.

This is partly informed by our perspective on what it means to be a human being living in the world. One common paradigm views humans as physical beings endeavouring to become spiritual. Another view is that we are spiritual beings experiencing and learning from being in a physical body and environment. Our essential self as loving, spontaneous, joyful and expressive cannot be lost but it can be forgotten. Many of our modern crises of meaning are a result of becoming disconnected from our essential nature.

The International Coach Federation (ICF) philosophy of coaching states that it ‘adheres to a form of coaching that honours the client as the expert in his/her life and work and believes that every client is creative, resourceful and whole.’

For me, spirituality adds to that and is about having a sense and appreciation of the underlying mystery of life and a quality of connection to a deeper source of strength and wisdom than that which comes from thinking and feelings alone. Hence, an important part of my work is to support clients in having that deeper connection to their source or essence, so that they choose goals that truly serve them and can draw on their inner resources and knowing. I encourage them to give up achieving things in order to become okay, and to live from that place, with all their flaws and idiosyncrasies, and then to choose how to express themselves. A question I sometimes ask is: ‘If you really knew that you were okay, what would you want to do?’

I also support coaches to have a presence with a respect for their clients, rather than seeing them as in need of fixing. I now start most of my training sessions with an exercise that, although based on Buddhist
principles, is very applicable generally. The coaches in training mill around and then pair up and make eye contact as I talk them through some words, inviting:

- loving kindness – wanting this person to be happy and free from fear, greed and other sources of suffering
- compassion – the willingness to be open to the other’s suffering, without needing to make it okay
- joy in the joy of another – celebrating the other’s joy and happiness
- equanimity – a place of deep acceptance that, whatever happens, we and they are an integral part of the web of life and this cannot be lost.

They then go on to develop their listening, powerful questions, clear communication etc – remembering, if possible, to use them in the context of the presence and attitude that this first exercise encourages.

I was originally introduced to this practice, under the title ‘Learning to See Each’, by Johanna Macy, in her workshops and training called The Work that Reconnects.3

**Being connected with, present to and embodying their own deeper identity, being and wisdom**

This may be experienced or referred to in many different ways, such as the source, the Self, the ‘no self’, the holy spirit, the great spirit, God, the divine mother or whatever has meaning for you. It is there as you coach and interact with your client, whatever you do, and whether you talk about it explicitly or not. It can be felt and expressed as a deep presence that includes and goes beyond thoughts, feelings, inklings and process. With this presence comes a sense of appreciation for the mystery and richness of life, a letting go of the need to know and an openness to something greater. In the words of coach Anne Walsh: ‘It’s a place below the usual daily turmoil where the client and I sit together and inspirations and intuitions and images come… it’s where it’s truly real – two souls sit together and there is another presence larger than both of us, and holding us both tenderly… that’s the only way I can describe it. I’m the light bulb, not the electricity’.4

From this place of presence and connection we do whatever we do in the session, including working with the different areas of spirituality mentioned above. In fact, we cannot work effectively with the other areas if we are not ourselves deeply connected. This cannot really be taught, although it can be cultivated as part and parcel of the coach’s own being and development. Meditation, contemplation, mindfulness practice, prayer and time in nature can all support it, as can a heartfelt connection with a particular religion.

**Beyond competencies**

In terms of coaches being credentialed, one of the challenges is that the kind of deep presence we are talking about here – which is much more than the coach’s listening, direct communication, reflection and questioning – cannot be easily measured. Hence the credentialing emphasis tends to be on ‘what the coach can be clearly seen to bring to the session’ rather than what occurs and comes out of the session – the process of which is often a mystery.

I support credentialing as a developmental process and accept that for this purpose competencies need to be evaluated. Certainly up to the equivalent of Professional Certified Coach with the ICF, I see that most coaches benefit greatly from it. At the same time, I want coaches to go beyond the standard competencies and to develop their own connection, authenticity and presence. I want them to create a space where both coach and client are connected to that something deeper and greater that we might call spiritual.

One of the things I sometimes introduce in coach training, especially if it is getting a bit too heady or technique-oriented, is the practice of gratitude. This can be at the level of appreciation and acknowledgement of ourselves and the client or it can go deeper into connecting with the greater presence and mystery of life.

Occasionally I have had students each read a verse from Joanna Macy’s Mohawk’s Thanksgiving Prayer,3 which begins:

‘The People
‘Today we have gathered and we see that the cycles of life continue. We have been given the duty to live in balance and harmony with each other and all living things. So now, we give greetings and thanks to each other as people. Now our minds are one.’

This is followed by another 17 verses and, by the time we have finished, the silence and presence I have been writing about are tangible in the room.

As with all personal spirituality and experience, it is difficult to describe them in written words without reducing and limiting them to things and concepts.

Never the less, my wish is that it becomes normal for coaches and therapists to work with, refer to and discuss these deeper essential aspects of ourselves and our work.

**References**

2. See http://www.coachfederation.org/clients/coaching-faqs/.