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Interventions in the Coaching Conversation
(Thinking, Feeling and Behaviour)

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*Socrates and then Archesilaus used to
make their pupils speak first;
they spoke afterwards.*

‘Obest plerumque iis qui discere volunt autoritas eorum qui docent.’

[For those who want to learn, the obstacle can often be the authority of those who teach.]

(Michel de Montaigne)

Executive Summary

Purpose of research

The purpose of the research was to investigate what it is that happens, not just in the moment of intervention between coach and client (that moment of change), but what it is that helps to create a transformational shift in thinking, feeling and behaviour on the part of the client as a result of the coaching conversation. My research was action-based, and was completed by analysing the interaction between the researcher as coach, and the language of intervention and experiential interactions with the client, during the coaching conversations.

Action research

Action research requires research to be applied to practical issues occurring in the everyday world; this project was very practical as it analysed the coaching conversation, the basic tool of the executive coach. Action research is collaborative by nature, and the clients were a major part of the project. As a result of the research, I have developed a practical coaching model, and a series of themes for coaching interventions that help coach and client to develop a relationship, and for the client to articulate existential issues such as freedom, meaning and purpose, choice and anxiety, and to identify and replace limiting paradigms with empowering paradigms, thus leading to positive change.

For this project, I selected six clients from my own coaching practice; this was to ensure that the research was not just practical, but that it was based on real coaching scenarios whose results would be of practical, immediate use to any executive coach wishing to understand more about the dynamics of the ‘coaching conversation’.

The result is a practical, executive coaching model which takes into consideration client concerns and issues: an overall structure which encompasses the *relationship*, *experiential learning*, and *existential issues* – and four stages (i.e. *reflection*, *responsibility*, *goals and action*, *learning and growth leading to change*). These are aligned to four key existential concerns (i.e. *freedom*, *meaning*, *choice* and *anxiety*) to help the client to identify and replace limiting assumptions, thus moving towards the creation of a more empowering worldview.

Existential phenomenological approach

This investigated the significance, meaning and structure of the coaching intervention in the coach-client conversation. Phenomenology is particularly suited to this project as it is a quest for meaning: a search for the structure of the phenomenon in the coaching conversation.

Existential phenomenology is used widely in psycho-therapy models, but its origin is in philosophy. It has been employed in a number of areas, and explicitly in coaching. Embedded in this project is a critique of the phenomenological approach, although this method proved to be the most suitable for this particular research project. I addressed the shortcomings of the phenomenological method, and produced a critique of the three-stage phenomenological model that I employed, particularly in relation to impartiality and the bracketing of assumptions.

Phenomenology was appropriate as it helped the researcher to become aware of the phenomena emerging and the processes that occur in the coach-client conversation. This particular methodology assisted the researcher in identifying the intervention techniques and the model that emerged as a result of the research project to frame the coach-client conversation.

Research questions

My research questions led me to analyse the coaching intervention in terms of: (a) breakthrough shifts in thinking, behaviour and performance; (b) creating transformational change; (c) how the coaching intervention helps build the relationship between client and coach.

My research questions ‘shifted’ from my original question about the ‘moment of change’ during the coaching conversation as it was not the only question relevant to the research. I refined my research and intensified the focus, formulating four key questions. The four questions that my research project attempts to answer are:

1. How does the coaching intervention in the client’s narrative help the client to make breakthrough shifts in thinking, feeling and behaviour – and consequently in performance?
2. What is it in the coaching intervention that creates sustained transformational change for the client, helping the client to make breakthrough shifts in thinking, feeling, language and behaviour – and therefore in performance?
3. What is it about the coaching intervention that makes the client think or behave in a certain way that helps to make a shift: a paradigm shift, a thinking shift, or a perception shift?

4. How do the coach's interventions help to build the relationship which then leads to shifts in thinking, feeling, and behaviour – and, ultimately, in performance?

My four final research questions enabled me to collect the right data, to analyse it in order to draw conclusions (positive and negative) and ultimately to provide recommendations to future coaches.

Conclusions, recommendations

At the heart of the coaching process, irrespective of the model or approach, is the relationship. This means that it is not necessarily about 'doing', for the client, but more about 'being' – creating a safe space: a container for thinking, feeling and insight to take place. This opens up the relationship to the over-arching umbrella within which the coaching conversation takes place.

As a result, I have:

- (a) Designed and tested an existential model for executive coaching.
- (b) Identified four stages of coaching intervention (*reflection and awareness; responsibility assumption and commitment; setting goals and action; learning and personal growth leading to change*).
- (c) Identified four existential concerns aligned to each of those stages: (*freedom, meaning, choice and anxiety*).
- (c) Developed a code book which is a reference guide for the coach of coaching interventions and client themes or concerns.
- (d) Demonstrated the importance of the coach working within a flexible coaching model, developing the relationship as the central focus of the conversation.
- (e) Structured the coaching conversation around the relationship, experiential learning and existential issues.

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Chapter 1

Introduction and Research Purpose

Chapter 1

Introduction and Research Purpose

1.1 The structure of the dissertation

This chapter provides an overview and introduction to this dissertation which embodies the results of my research into the coaching intervention in the coach/client conversation. Coaching is fundamentally the act of helping a person reach and clarify their goals. From the point of view of this particular research project, the obstacles in the way of an individual's achievement are within the realms of thinking and feeling, and these obstacles can range from limiting assumptions and limiting paradigms to limiting worldviews.

The research and development materials include: a literature review of selected texts to examine contemporary coaching intervention frameworks, and the philosophy and theoretical underpinnings of this research project; an analysis of the research methodology, including a description of my evolving coaching model; the project activity and project findings; an analysis of client coaching transcripts including the Ethnograph analysis; a summary of the learning journey throughout the doctoral programme, which includes spearheading and co-founding COMENSA (Coaches and Mentors of South Africa); bibliography; project evidence; and appendices.

The appendices include chapter notes, the developing stages of the coaching model, and the new ethics and standards codes for Coaches and Mentors of South Africa (COMENSA). The annexure on evidence includes the final existential executive coaching model, an outline for a new book to be written and published on executive coaching during 2006, and the final code book of coach interventions and client themes.

1.2 Proposal for research project

Working title of project:

Interventions in the Coaching Conversation (Thinking, Feeling and Behaviour)

1.2.1 Rationale

The original intention of this research project was to begin to recognise specific coaching interventions in the coach/client conversation, and to identify how the coach's interventions

help the client make breakthrough shifts in thinking, feeling and behaviour – and consequently in performance. The project ultimately involved analysing the coach’s interventions and trying to understand how those interventions help to build a relationship between coach and client which leads to shifts in thinking, feeling, and behaviour – and in performance.

1.2.2 Project aim

This is a work-based project, the purpose of which is research and development on an aspect of executive coaching that will enhance working practice for all professional coaches, executive coaches and coaching practitioners. My aim is to add to the body of knowledge in a field that is under-researched, *viz.* what happens as a result of interventions in the coaching conversation in executive coaching. I expect my research to be beneficial to the coaching community worldwide. Not all research is based on a hypothesis, and this research is based on a set of questions which have evolved over a three-year period to embody the coaching intervention and the relationship which develops between coach and client.

1.3 Research purpose

Although many models of coaching have been devised (GROW, CBT, NLP, ICF, integral, evidence-based coaching, co-active coaching, learning conversations, thinking skills, Best Year Yet) and academics and practitioners are continually refining their coaching models (McWhinney, Kolb, Whitworth, Flaherty, O’Neill, Starr, Downey), the ability to ask questions and listen have been defined as the core competencies of an executive coach.¹

My specific purpose is to conduct research in relation to what it is that happens, not just in the moment of intervention between coach and client (that moment of change, insight or what might informally be described as the “a-ha!” or moment of realisation), but what it is that helps to create a transformational shift in thinking, feeling and behaviour on the part of the client. My research is based upon the language used, and the narrative as it unfolds, during the coaching conversation.

Much research has been conducted in the fields of linguistics and semiotics (Chomsky, Barthes, Eriksson, Sapir, and Whorf) and psychology (Jung’s analytical psychology; cognitive behavioural therapy; social psychology) as to the ability of the client to create change at the level of *thinking, language, feeling and behaviour*. But as yet not much practical research has been conducted as to *what specifically happens* in the “coaching conversation” around change and transformational thinking, language and feeling, and how that impacts on behaviour and performance, if at all.

1.3.1 The coaching conversation

Many books have been published on the “coaching conversation” and “coaching question framework” which I will refer to in the literature review (with particular reference to Mary Beth O’Neill, Robert Hargrove, John Whitmore, Laura Whitworth, and Nancy Kline); and also in terms of adult learning, experiential learning, paradigm shifts, existentialism, existential phenomenology, existential psychotherapy and coaching models (for example, David Boud, David Kolb, Sheila Harri-Augstein and Laurie Thomas, Carl G. Jung, Bruce Peltier, Thomas Kuhn, Irvin Yalom and Ernesto Spinelli).

Part of my research is to explore what thinking has evolved around the subject of the coach’s intervention in the coaching conversation, and to develop a template of “coaching questions” or “coaching interventions” that will be useful to any new or experienced coach.

This is an important subject to any coach who wishes to promote the benefits of executive coaching on an individual, team and/or organisational basis. These are relevant and aligned to my specific coaching model as it has evolved. The model is explored in Chapter 5: Project Findings.

1.3.2 Action research into the coaching intervention

I wanted to conduct research into the “a-ha!” or “change moment” (if it existed in the coach/client session), and the coaching interventions (questions, statements, dialogue, pattern interrupts) the coach uses to help the client create paradigm shifts that lead to sustained behavioural change or shifts in performance. My research was action-based within a phenomenological approach, and was completed by analysing client coaching transcripts for the interaction between coach practitioner and client, and the language of intervention and experiential interactions between coach and client during the coaching conversations.

My specific research is focused on six coach/client face-to-face interactions over a period of one to two years. I made the fundamental mistake in my research project of involving too many clients in the research project – and ultimately had 14 clients from whom to choose data. The client sessions from all 14 clients were transcribed and studied (C1 to C14), but six clients were finally selected, plus one pilot executive client (C15) whose interviews were not taped or transcribed. However, the entire range of 14 clients will be beneficial for the background research for a new book on executive coaching which is planned for 2006. In addition, I felt it was important to select clients who reflected the diverse culture of South Africa.

1.3.3 Moments of change

My original intention was to identify the phenomena and processes that define those “a-ha” ‘moments of change’ in thinking, language and feeling – and how they lead to changes in performance, behaviour and attitude, both professionally and personally. I looked at the coaching conversation over a period of six to 10 sessions or over a 12- to 18-month period; each client was unique. I closely examined those critical moments that brought about a change of perception or thinking in the client during the coaching conversation, and I looked for themes, key words, patterns and overall shifts in the process. My aim was ultimately to try to identify what it is about the coach’s interventions that bring about awareness, an understanding of self, process and change in the client, and at the same time how those interventions help to build the client/coach relationship.

1.4 Limiting assumptions and limiting paradigms

With all thinking that takes place in the coaching environment, the key obstacles to fluid or clear thinking and the setting and achievement of goals are usually limiting assumptions. In fact, the obstacles that emerge in life often stem from the obstacles contained within an individual’s thinking. When appropriate, working within my coaching model we identify, remove and replace disempowering assumptions with more empowering and liberating ones.

I first began to work with assumptions, paradigms and limiting worldviews with my study of Thomas Kuhn (1977) and Will McWhinney (1991, 1996). It was in the last three years that I have been introduced to Nancy Kline (2005). The freedom to think through limiting assumptions has a transformational effect on the client’s ability to think clearly, make decisions, understand feelings and achieve goals.

The term ‘paradigm shift’ refers to the process and result of a change in paradigm, or a radical change in theory or worldview. The term was originally applied to science, but it has become widely used in other realms of human experience as well. Other uses of the term “paradigm shift” can denote a shift in thought patterns, or a radical change in personal beliefs or systems which replace a previous way of thinking.

My coaching model, and my individual coaching conversations with clients, are generally structured to uncover limiting paradigms or limiting assumptions that hold them back, and to replace these with more empowering paradigms. The development of the model is explained in Chapter 5: Project Findings, and is demonstrated in the annexure on Evidence.

1.5 Existentialism

The reason for exploring the history of existentialism is because the existential approach helps us to ask this question about relationships: “how is it possible that one being relates to another?” (May, 1983: 9). Participation and relationship involve risk. Freud spoke of the “relation to the world of being who has the possibility to go out but is too threatened to do so” (May, 1983: 20).

The value of existentialism in this project is related to the difference between ‘being’ qualities and ‘doing’ qualities – in other words, away from a focus on tasks, which have a ‘doing dominance’. From an existential point of view, coaching is the place where coach and client meet: the coach is there to seek the ‘wider relational’ space. Spinelli (1989) suggests that the coach should underpin the wish to be a coach with a deeply human desire to engage with others, to challenge, and finally to provide an alternative as much of value to oneself as to the client.

One of the key issues in working with clients is the degree of anxiety, loss or lack of confidence, and damage to their self-esteem that takes place in the workplace. Therefore it is important to create safety, rapport and trust between coach and client in order to work well and productively together. In other words, it is important for the coach to create a safe thinking environment in order for the coaching conversation to take place, building trust and rapport between client and coach.

According to Yalom (1980: 401), although “it is the relationship that heals”, he agrees that the important existential issues that people face in life are rarely investigated (Karlsson, 1993: 11). One paradox is that, as a coach, I seek to create a safe thinking environment for the relationship to develop between clients and coach in order for those less safe existential issues to emerge.²

1.5.1 The existential phenomenological approach

Phenomenological psychology is firmly grounded in philosophy. Spinelli says the principle task of existential phenomenology is the exploration of “the potentials for freedom and the unavoidable limitations inherent in human beings’ experience of themselves as beings-in-the-world” (Spinelli, 1989: xii).

The exploration of subjective experience is the primary task of the phenomenologist (Spinelli, 1989). Although phenomenologists attempt to bracket or set aside conscious experience in order to arrive at an approximation of reality, the researcher’s dilemma in this project has been how to approach the data in the transcripts without bringing in her assumptions, perspective

and biases. The task of the phenomenologist is therefore to expose how consciousness imposes itself upon reality and in effect confuses reality.

1.5.2 Meaning construction and reality

The existential phenomenological approach is central to this particular research project, which is investigating the significance, meaning and structure of the coaching intervention in the coach/client conversation. Because the question of consciousness remains the starting point of all phenomenological investigations, “the central focus of Phenomenological Psychology rests, more properly, with the analyses of how all of us arrive at ‘unique interpretations’ of our experience by intrinsic means and experientially acquired social constructs” (Spinelli, 1989: iv).

As human beings we attempt to make sense of our experiences, and through our mental acts we strive to impose meaning upon our world. But an underlying question that Spinelli raises is “what is real?” (Spinelli, 1989: iv). In existential phenomenological terms, reality will forever remain an unknown; essentially, reality is something for which we construct meaning.

Thus, the starting point of phenomenological enquiry is how human beings use their mental processes to make sense of their experiences and then construct or impose meaning upon their individual world. What we do with our mental processes generally is that we have an amazing capacity as human beings to construct meaning, and this is the actual starting point for phenomenological enquiry.

1.5.3 A phenomenological view of reality

In my approach to coaching and for this project I have adopted an existential phenomenological approach. I work with clients to help them understand the meaning and the interpretation they put onto their experience, their thinking, and the events that happen to them. There is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’: from a phenomenological point of view, there is only the interpretation we give to our thinking, to the events we experience, and to the things of significance that happen to us.

So the question then is: if a coach is working with the client, when is it that the coach intervenes? Is it right or wrong for the coach to intervene, and why is the coach intervening? What is the coach helping the client to do? In my interpretation, the coach is helping the client with their own interpretation of the significance and meaning they give to the things that happen to them in their lives, to the thoughts they think in their lives, and to the events that happen to them in their lives.

This is a phenomenological approach. Husserl asks, “Whose Reality is truly real?”, and our answers are relative as they are based upon a number of socio-cultural variables. Our reality is a phenomenological one, meaning that our reality remains open to a “multiplicity” of interpretations.³ The difficulty for the researcher in reading the transcripts of coach/client conversations is then how to set aside the researcher’s bias or reality in looking to identify the phenomenon as they emerge, and to identify whether it is possible.

1.5.4 The search for meaning

When the coach works with a client, both client and coach are constantly searching for meaning. Originally, prior to this research project, my view was that the client would arrive to tell you their story in order to achieve clarity and to find a way forward in their professional and personal life. I have come to understand that it is not just the story (i.e. the content) that is important. The client is looking for an *interpretation* of their story; they are looking to understand the significance and meaning of their story. They’re looking to understand the significance of what’s happening to them. This is a purely subjective process; and the coach’s role becomes one of helping the client to explore and examine how he/she constructs reality (remembering that modern phenomenology, according to Husserl, cannot tell us what is the true nature of reality).

For me, phenomenology works well because the purpose of the method is to identify and clarify the variables of individual experience so that the structure, meaning and significance of the phenomena may be made more explicit.

1.6 Were the social implications considered?

This project is beneficial to those coaching practitioners and academics who wish to further understand the dynamic between coach and client. On examination, I do not consider that it is detrimental to either coach or client, or to the organisation for which the client works. The only potential ‘hazard’ was if the client decided to leave their organisation of employment as a result of the coaching – which could be seen as a negative or a positive, depending on the context.

1.6.1 Have the economic implications been explored?

Although the financial considerations were fairly consequential, the six coaching clients were primarily commercial, fee-paying clients, and they paid for the coaching as it took place. Their fees provided funds for the purchase of the Ethnograph computer programme, and to pay the three researchers whose job was to transcribe the client coaching sessions and design the

Ethnograph analysis. Although time proved to be a serious constraint, as analysis and writing took time away from fee-paying activities, all but one client was a fee-paying client. She was a *pro-bono* client, a previously disadvantaged citizen, now successful in her own right in the new South Africa. Despite the costs, the project was feasible, and it was possible to sustain the research and evidence-gathering and analysis.

1.6.2 Is the research sustainable?

This project is about the sustainable development of executive coaches at an international, professional level. The research will provide further learning and growth for those wishing to develop an in-depth understanding of the coaching process, and to discover how to add to their own competence, practice and standards.

This research is highly relevant to the development of a professional coaching community in a new field (executive coaching), particularly in South Africa where coaching is very much in its formative stages. A requirement of this research was to help initiate and spearhead an organisation to develop ethics, standards and continuing professional development for coaches and mentors in South Africa. This organisation, Coaches and Mentors of South Africa (COMENSA), was launched formally in April 2006.

Due to this project I have been privileged to meet or communicate with a majority of the coaches training and working in the South African marketplace, the educational institutions leading the development of coaching and mentoring in South Africa, and the corporate organisations which buy and provide bespoke coaching and mentoring programmes.

1.7 The personal rationale

This practical research project was to take me through the next step in my career as an executive coach and professional trainer of coaches. Coaching has been a natural progression from training, facilitation and performance development for individuals and teams at senior executive level. To be actively involved in the developmental stages of coaching in South Africa has been a very exciting prospect, particularly as I have worked closely with: the academic students of the I-coach academy, Middlesex University London; professional coaches in the corporate/commercial sector; members of the Integral Coaching Association, which the I-coach doctoral students created as a forum to work together professionally (now folded into COMENSA); and COMENSA and the training institutions (CTASA) in the development phases of the creation of unit standards and a standards generating body for coaches and mentors.⁴

I have moved into a stage of my career which is predominantly coaching, training and supervising coaches, and writing and research. This project has been a vital step in my development as a researcher and executive coach, and will help take me the next step to research and write a new book on executive coaching. It is also related to the role I play in my local community, firstly with the WHEAT (Women's Hope Education and Training) Trust for whom I provide *pro-bono* coaching, and secondly where I and my husband have created a legal trust to raise funds to entirely rebuild a ramshackle school that serves the teachers, parents and children of their impoverished local township. It is also a necessary step in creating a forum for coaching in the overall business community, where I am seen to be a leader in the field of executive and entrepreneurial coaching and facilitation of learning and development.

1.7.1 Background leading to the project

In the mid 1970s, when I began my professional career, there was no career path for performance consultant, facilitator, or business coach. The only roles that semi-inspired me were those of counsellor or teacher. It was a decade before I discovered my passion for communication and training. I had developed the skill and competence to train, counsel, coach and develop people – this being a synthesis of the skills gained from working in international marketing, management and performance development.

In the early 1970s I left the USA to live in England and France. Leaving the United States, which then paid only lip service to concepts such as understanding diversity in the work-place, was an important move. I began to more clearly understand the dynamics of cultural complexity. Perhaps due to its dominant position in the world, the United States projects and fosters an intellectual over-confidence in terms of cultural superiority and hegemonic cultural attitudes. It is only since leaving my country, for example, that I have read the great linguist and political dissident, Noam Chomsky, whose ideas are more readily available in Europe, and completely silenced in mainstream American thought and media.

For my M.A. thesis in the early 1980s, I turned to a much neglected 1930s black woman writer – who only now is achieving the major stature and acclaim that she deserves. Living outside one's country, and having to learn a foreign language (French) was a salutary, even humbling experience for an American from a middle-class white family. It was hard for someone from such a background to understand the concept of being an outsider. But this perspective is absolutely critical, especially in the line of work that I have chosen (as executive coach and researcher), because it gives me another perspective. I am required to see the world from the point of view of 'the other'.

Now, having decided to settle in South Africa (the country of my husband's birth) after the advent of democracy in 1994, I sense having come full circle: insider/outsider/insider, with the ability and the passion to be a significant change agent.

1.7.2 Writing and communication

One of my key learnings is related to my own ability to communicate. Up to, perhaps 20 years ago, I was accustomed to and comfortable writing in a more academic format and mode. Since publishing several books, and encouraged by my author husband, I have striven to achieve a clearer prose style and to try and express complex ideas in clearer, more personal language.

Although versed in many of the academic conventions, having kept up with trends in intellectual thought such as structuralism and post-modernism, and having read authors such as Barthes and Derrida, I have set for myself the aim of avoiding set phrases, and attempting to say, in my own words, as clearly as possible, exactly what I mean. I feel that this style of communication is one that I continually need to strive for; it is a task that I have set for myself in this thesis.

My mother's Lancastrian father; my Canadian, maternal grandmother; my Swedish paternal grandfather; and my maternal Norwegian grandmother all contributed to my horizons – which proved to be greater than the borders of the USA. But, in those days, Canada, Norway, Sweden and England seemed less exotic than France and Italy, which seemed a world apart. In my first summer, between the first two years of college and my last two years of living in my own country, I gained a scholarship to study in Paris and Madrid. I was thrust into a novel world at 18 years old; language had become an adventure related to culture and history - not just something learned out of context. For the first time, before the invention of the popular term, 'personal mastery' became something I began to work on in earnest.

I created an exit from the USA when I was 21 years old; I was despondent about the American political machine during the Vietnam years, and unhappy with the direction in which my country was headed. I chose Paris. But I couldn't reside there on my US passport, so moved to England, where I lived, studied and worked for over 25 years, with several years in France. Prior to graduating from Portsmouth Polytechnic and the University of Strasbourg in comparative literature and historical studies, I was offered a job as a television presenter for Southern Television. I spent the next four years as a television presenter on a woman's magazine programme, working simultaneously on my master's thesis at the University of Sussex.

This was the first time that research had become intrinsic to work and academic life. I had to research each programme item I presented; it was my job to persuade the producer of the validity of each topic. The subject I chose for my Master's dissertation was Zora Neale Hurston: the then neglected and trail-blazing 1930s black American writer.

Today, looking back, I feel that that Master's degree – on a then undiscovered writer – was a major achievement. At that time, I was interested in linguistics and the use of oral folklore and dialogue. I was intrigued by the way Zora Neale Hurston and other Southern women writers used local dialect to tell the history of a people, a nation, and a gender. Thus began my life-long study of women writers of dual-nation, or dual-language status.

When I completed my Master's degree and my stint with Southern Television, I took up a job at Tambrands as European marketing manager. That was my next research task; I was partly responsible for the education booklets written for the four Nordic countries, as well as co-ordinating the retail distributors and advertising agencies in each country. I was actively involved in negotiating with government health agencies to co-ordinate packaging copy, along with chemical and material content of the products. Working every week in Norway, Finland, Sweden and Denmark, I studied financial accounting and international marketing with the Open University to upgrade my management skills.

My next post was a promotion to senior management with Holiday Inns; then another move to being head of sales and promotions at a large newspaper. I was intent on learning the skills and competencies of management and marketing quickly. Those positions catapulted me into the next stage of training and performance development, and I set up a training consultancy in 1989. My second husband, a journalist, supported me in my first tentative steps into writing and publishing. I was pleased to publish a series of BBC books on training and development (*Doing Business* in France, Germany and Italy); and *Managing Training* (Kogan Page).

South Africa was beckoning. My husband had left South Africa aged 21; having been absent 28 years, he always dreamed of returning. We made the decision on a trip back to South Africa in 1994 for the production of one of his plays. We decided it was time for him to return. I tackled the move to South Africa like a research project. We spent a year organising a new home, investigating the marketplace and setting up a business. It was challenging to leave behind 25 years in Europe, a 23-year-old stepdaughter in Italy, and to move to a new country, particularly South Africa, with its own unique, destructive history.

I researched the domestic, economic, social and political marketplaces, and eventually our local community. About 30 per cent of our time is currently devoted to community project

work. We started a fund-raising project to rebuild a very ramshackle primary school for 800 children which serves a nearby, very poor township.

Every day, I learn more about cultural complexity. I negotiate different languages and constantly juggle the diversity of history and cultures, working in this new, multi-racial democracy. Coming from a country with similar civil rights strife, and a country that fought for its early democracy, there are some similarities that I relate to.

I have returned to the starting point of my Master's degree in 1980 - looking at dialogue, culture, language and history. My journey to South Africa is the completion of a circle, where I work with clients' inner struggles and external conflicts. For example, I think of the work I'm currently doing with a parliamentary correspondent from a radical Afrikaans background, and her inner turmoil with her groundbreaking work with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission; and the conflict between the teachers and parents at the school we are trying to build in our community (the parents speak Xhosa, the teachers speak Afrikaans, and; the wider community speaks English).

I am particularly interested in the use of dialogue, personal narrative and creative myth-making. This interest has brought me to the present moment in my career, where I work with clients to help them understand the tapestry of their own personal history and how it relates to their external reality.

My studies have led to an exploration of how individuals think and learn, and how they create myths and personal narratives from their own personal history and the culture of their time. I am constantly learning about adapting to adversity and developing cultural competence. This is from my own personal adjustment to living in other countries, but also from my reading of European, African, African-American, and Chinese-American writers. My journey has taken me during the last five years to try to help unravel the narratives and myths my clients weave around their own lives in their attempt to adapt to their professional environment, and to confront their own personal struggles.

In South Africa I encounter a multiplicity of languages, cultures and histories. I work at a deep level of linguistic and historical complexity, due to the three cultures in the Western Cape ("coloured", African and white), and the mixture of people who attend my workshops in Johannesburg (a variety of people from South Africa, Zambia, Swaziland, Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe). When I deliver a workshop, I conduct it in English – but there are always at least two other first languages spoken in the room (for example, Afrikaans, Xhosa, Zulu, German, Swazi or Sesotho). From 30 years ago, my interest in Zora Neale Hurston's

pioneering work with oral dialect has influenced my current work within the multi-faceted language, culture and history of South Africa.

When I first met my current publisher, Kogan Page, in London in early 2000, I was thinking of publishing a book based on my various areas of expertise. The essence of the project was to base the book on the tools and methodologies used in my work – the techniques that I incorporated into training and facilitation, and specific tools or models used in my coaching practice. Eventually I realised that I needed to write a separate book on coaching. One of the key factors in building my coaching practice has been to understand the ethical dilemmas which exist in the South African context. In the development of my coaching practice, I work with a range of clients, both as individuals and teams. This work has led me to the next stage, a doctorate and hopefully a new book on coaching.

1.8 Supervision

A key component of my personal and professional approach to this project was to work on a regular basis with a psychotherapist. I attended therapy sessions as a patient at least once every two weeks over a period of two years. The purpose of this was three-fold: firstly, and crucially, to deal with any unresolved issues of my own (an on-going process for any coach) and to learn not to bring my concerns or triggers to the coaching conversation; secondly, this provided me with invaluable and on-going supervision for my coaching practice, including academic guidance and research suggestions for my research project; and thirdly, this process provided me with an invaluable tool to understand the client / practitioner process from another perspective, i.e. client rather than the practitioner. It provided an excellent alternate perspective on the entire research process and my coaching practice.

1.9 Evidence portfolio

The evidence presented as a result of this research project is: (a) an existential executive coaching model which can be used professionally and taught at academic level; (b) a code book of client themes and coaching interventions; (c) an outline for a new book on coaching to be written in 2006 and published in 2007; and (d) a doctoral thesis which reports the findings of the research project. Other by-products of the research project have been the development of two academic coaching programmes designed and delivered for The Coaching Centre's foundation and advanced level certificate programmes in Cape Town; a lecture on the 10 components of the Nancy Kline thinking process to be delivered at an ASTD (American Society for Training and Development) conference; and the spearheading of COMENSA

(Coaches and Mentors of South Africa) as a requirement for the project to establish ethics and standards for coaches in South Africa.

1.9.1 Structure of the research project

I have set about the research in four stages: (1) I recorded client coaching sessions and made transcripts of those sessions; (2) continued to read and take reflective notes on the contemporary literature on coaching models, frameworks and questions, and analysed contemporary research in the realm of existential phenomenology, existential psychotherapy, time-limited existential psychotherapy, adult learning, and experiential learning; investigated existentialism and phenomenology as the foundation of the project's methodology; (3) dictated and wrote extensive notes during each coaching session, and completed post-session reflective notes (some of which needed transcribing); and (4) hired three researchers during my three-year doctoral journey: (a) one researcher, Lucy Liebman, typed the coaching session transcripts; (b) a second researcher, Tanith Curtin, typed my dictated reflections on books and articles that I read, and the reflections at the end of each academic coaching session on which I taught at The Coaching Centre; and (c) a third researcher, Andrew Verridgt, studying for a Masters degree in organisational psychology set up the computer programme (the Ethnograph), and assisted in developing the analysis code for the first level of coaching transcript analysis.

1.10 Conclusions of the research

As a result of this research, I have developed an existential coaching model which takes into consideration client concerns and issues: an overall structure which encompasses the *relationship*, *experiential learning*, and *existential issues* – and four stages of the coaching conversation (*reflection*, *responsibility*, *goals* and *change*). These are aligned to four key existential concerns (*freedom*, *meaning*, *choice* and *anxiety*) to help the client identify and replace limiting assumptions, thus moving towards the creation of a more empowering worldview.

The relationship develops as a result of the 'coaching conversation', with client issues and concerns teased out by the skill and expertise of the coach's interventions. These interventions, however, need to be part of a larger structure, such as a coaching model – as long as the coach operates with complete flexibility within the model to cater for the concerns of the client.