The Time to Dance Is Now:
A Reflection on the Interview with
Julio Olalla
By David Drake

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I remember since my early days in school, I had a compelling call to go for freedom and justice and not to be indifferent to what was happening in the world. . . . Maybe that came from the fact that I lived in little towns in Chile where I was directly in touch with poverty, misery at different levels, lack of education, alcoholism, etc. Also, there was a constant message from my father . . . He came from Spain to Chile as a refugee after the civil war in Spain. So, my father's presence was a statement of persecution and lack of freedom. My father never talked too much about the war, but when he did refer to the war, I remember him saying, “I hope that you never have in your life anything like that.” So, he was a refugee, and I became a refugee a little later in my life. The fact that we had this common experience, for sure, is in the background of this driving force for change.

Given my work with narrative coaching, it is no surprise that I would begin with a compelling story from the interview with Julio. If he were here now, I would explore with him the experience of being a refugee (and his associations with that word) as it seems central to both this story and his work. For now, I offer my appreciation for the way in which he makes the connection between his own historical circumstances and a broader realization about life itself. In doing so, he surfaces one of the key challenges within coaching: how to take what is often a deeply personal experience and infuse it with a social and critical perspective. Throughout the interview he reiterates the importance of seeing individual issues as part of broader dynamics and discourses.

For example, his personal story is a springboard for his thesis that modernity has exhausted its ways. . . . We need to now revise the...
fundamental dispositions of modernity in every single aspect to live after modernity. And if we don’t do the job . . . we are going to face enormous pain for the species as a species. I could not agree more, particularly his powerful words about pain for the species (and the rest of the species as well). A key message I heard between the lines of this interview was a call from Julio for coaches to step more fully into both their own personal development and their engagement in larger issues. It seems to me that coaching is uniquely positioned to bridge these two worlds—the deeply personal and the deeply global—but to do so will require coaches to more courageously do for themselves what they do so well for others. What I appreciate about Julio is his willingness to take a lead in this regard. He ends the above section with his own personal mission: I will not forgive myself if I don’t act in the face of those challenges. This heartfelt comment prompted me to more honestly reflect for myself on where I stand and what is mine to do at this time in my life.

**FOUR LENSES ON THE WORLD**

As a framework for his conversation with Bill, Julio draws on three classic philosophical distinctions to talk about the issues we face as human beings on this planet right now and the place for coaching as a source for change. He talks about cosmology, ontology and epistemology—in that order. I would make the case, echoed in the interview, that the traditional western approaches in these three domains have been increasingly biased in the direction of the separate individual, the rational logic, the scientific method, and the technological solution. Breakthroughs in areas such as the neurosciences, feminist epistemologies, liberation theologies, and narrative methods have given rise to the awareness that there are other complementary viewpoints that may be quite useful in mitigating the negative impact of our current ways of being, thinking and acting. Julio talks about and joins forces with many pioneers who dared to challenge the grand narratives of their time and/or discipline in order to point to another way.

He positions cosmology, ontology and epistemology as the traditions in which modernity has been established. While ontology is clearly at the core of his intellectual heritage and work, he makes some solid connections with the other two. As I read the interview, I thought about all that I know about culture change and coaching, since this is a large part of what I do with clients these days. I wondered about the various levers for change in working with clients and I realized that something was missing for me as I thought about the unique contextual challenges in my client organizations. As a result, I came to see the value in adding ecology as a fourth domain with its own tradition. The term “ecology” was coined by the German biologist Ernst Haeckel in 1866; he defined it as “the comprehensive science of the relationship of the organism to the environment” (Wikipedia).

It seems to me that coaching is uniquely positioned to bridge these two worlds—the deeply personal and the deeply global—but to do so will require coaches to more courageously do for themselves what they do so well for others.
I am using the term here as the study of the relational nature of collective life. While it comes from outside the classic philosophical tradition, it is in line with Julio’s interests around a more biological perspective and it provides a relational force to balance what Julio describes as the predominant individualistic, separated, reductionist construction of the other three domains in contemporary society. It also links well with his interests in an embodied, contextual and relational approach to identity and development. An ecological approach is practical as it takes place in what Jerome Bruner (1986) called the “landscape of action” and it is inherently powerful in that it opens up new possibilities for both coaching and our clients. I would add that the constructions and implications of the original three lenses (cosmology, ontology and epistemology) are most easily seen in terms of how people inhabit their ecologies. For example, I draw from Yalom’s (1998) existential approaches to therapy in getting clients to focus on what they actually do now in their environments as a window into their preferred ways of believing, being and thinking.

In taking an ecological view, coaches can make better distinctions among the domains as they have been enacted in clients, organizations and society at large. In doing so, coaches can help their clients to see how they navigate and narrate their environments and to develop alternate approaches that better suit their goals. Just as form should follow function, we can draw from Zen Buddhism to remember that the finger pointing at the moon is not the moon. I take this to mean here that while each of these four domains has been codified as a tool for understanding, they are not synonymous with our experience. Instead, they are dynamic, ever-changing “fictions” (Hillman, 1983) and, as such, they can be adapted to meet the needs of our clients and our time in history. The dominant western fictions have served many of us well, but they need now to be integrated with other stories to create a more holistic and sustainable approach to living for all. As we move in this direction, Julio’s comments certainly captured the importance of the famous line attributed to Albert Einstein that we cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.

In general, I would describe the four domains as follows:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Lens</th>
<th>Focus</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cosmology: ways of narrating</td>
<td>Order, place/belonging, life/death, myth/ritual, meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ontology: ways of being</td>
<td>Observation, existence, identity, somatics, language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epistemology: ways of knowing</td>
<td>Logic, sensation, awareness, cognition, categorization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecology: ways of living</td>
<td>Relationship, manifestation, action, adaptation</td>
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As Julio notes, there is a cascading effect from our cosmologies to our ontologies to our epistemologies [and now to our ecologies] — which manifests in the ways in which we believe, exist, perceive,
and interact with one another. We can work back upstream to see this cascade in coaching where there is an initial focus on rapport and assessment/feedback (ecology), an examination of the cognitive patterns that may need to shift (epistemology), the ways of being and emotions behind these patterns of thinking (ontology) and the stories we have internalized (cosmology). It is also true that different approaches to coaching tend to emphasize different areas of focus. We can see this at the epistemological level in approaches such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), mindfulness, and the neurosciences. We can see this at the ontological level in approaches such as ontological, somatic, and neurolinguistic programming (NLP).

I would contend that the narrative approach to coaching, central to working at the cosmological level, is one that in some ways integrates the other three levels. For example, a narrative approach draws on collective myths, shared discourse, narrative structure, and stories in the moment as part of the work. I also believe that we will increasingly see an interest in cosmological approaches to coaching in general as we come to know more about our universe (as per Bill's comment), contend with the moral implications of our scientific and technological advances, and grapple with the dire state of the planet. While limitations in our cosmological frame are in many ways at the center of our current dilemmas, this level is also the source of new possibilities. Therefore, it is important that we more explicitly link cosmology to ecology as the arena in which new stories, new language, and new knowledge come to life. This aim is captured beautifully in words from William Blake,

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in one hour

The wholeness Julio seeks will require a unifying force to heal our “cognitive schizophrenia.” Adding an ecological frame helps in this regard by bringing together the “interior” and “exterior” that Ken Wilber and others justly claim have been separated for centuries in much of western culture. An ecological frame is useful as well in making more room for relational as well as instrumental approaches to development and communication. Both of these contributions seem important for the call to action Julio offers to the coaching community. I can imagine that Julio would be drawn to Winnicott’s (1971) work on “third places” that are neither inner nor outer but serve as a fertile ground for play, creativity and spirituality. I have written about this dynamic in working with the “third spaces” in client stories (see Drake, 2007) so clients can transcend the polarities inherent in their habitual stories. Third spaces give us room to experiment and explore what movement we would need to make, and at what level, in
order to awaken more fully and act more consciously. This would go a long way in addressing Julio’s important insight that most crises that we have, in order to move to the next level or to regress to the previous one, are emotional crises. I am reminded of the closing line from a William Stafford (1993) poem in this regard,

And so I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy a remote region in all who talk: though we could fool each other, we should consider — lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark. For it is important that awake people be awake, or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep; the signals we give — yes or no, or maybe — should be clear: the darkness around us is deep (p. 136).

In using these four domains to address the serious issues we face, it is important to be diligent with our language. For example, I wanted more clarity around the comments from Bill and Julio about the notion of the earth as being seen as mechanistic rather than biological. It seems to me that these two are hard to contrast because the former is more of a cosmological and ontological frame whereas the latter is more of an epistemological system. I am also not sure they are inherently different. Quantum physics and complexity theories, for example, represent some important non-mechanistic views in a non-biological realm. There are mechanistic takes on biology as well. I think there are ways in which using biological metaphors may serve us well and I wholeheartedly agree there is an urgency to make profound changes in how we inhabit the world. However, there is a clear case to be made for moving to higher levels of distinction in both our descriptions of what is not working and our development of more generative options. Let me turn now to comment on the four lenses as a platform for my reflections on Julio’s ideas about where we go from here.

Cosmology
I would concur with the observation they shared from Richard Tarnas that there will not be any fundamental shift in human thinking unless we shift the cosmology on which we are basing our thinking. Julio joins with others such as Catholic writer Matthew Fox and cultural historian Thomas Berry in advocating for a cosmology-based approach to shifting our patterns of believing, being, thinking and living. Berry sums it up well on his website when he writes, “The universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.” The shifts we need in our cosmology will require a deeper engagement with the best of our wisdom traditions and a more courageous engagement with the realities of the 21st century. As Julio pointed out, one of the many benefits of doing so will be to move away from a reliance on the cosmological assumptions at the root of the mechanistic and militaristic metaphors that dominate our descriptions of organizational life and leadership and serve as the foundation for much of
our organizational identities, words, and behaviors. As one alternative, I wrote about the possibilities of using narrative metaphors with a colleague (Drake & Lanahan, 2007). Lakoff’s (see Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) work on metaphors points in this direction by demonstrating that our language is both rooted in and impacts on our cosmologies.

In talking about cosmology, Julio refers to key referent points such as Newton and Copernicus regarding the evolution of our thinking along these lines,

*Newton was transcended, but Copernicus has not been transcended.*

*We are still Copernican when we take a look. Regardless of the size of the whole thing, we are still in that paradigm. . . . But the universe, in our common sense, is still considered mechanistic—a no-purpose, no-meaning, no-direction thing that only has meaning if we assign some to it. And that permeates and informs every single thought of the common human being on the planet today.*

This rich paragraph deserves particular attention. I want to offer a different perspective relative to three of his key claims in order to enrich the conversation Julio has begun. First, as I understand the history and nature of science, much of the physical world can still be reasonably described using Newton’s insights; e.g., standing under an apple tree. I believe it would be an error for the reader to infer from Julio’s comments that Newtonian thinking had been replaced. In developing a stance in coaching that will be adequate for our times it seems prudent to not follow in the footsteps of much of human history in assuming that our current (privileged) understanding is the last, best and only one. Second, as we often discover with our clients, it can be challenging for people to take on a different viewpoint than they had before. I wonder what it would take for people to adopt non-Copernican view of their place in the cosmos. Can they attain greater enlightenment even if that never happens? Third, I tend to take an existential view in which people bring meaning to the universe. This does not require a mechanistic view, but actually bodes well for a profound yet humble connection with a living universe. I see it as an avenue to accountability rather than a path to despair as it requires clients to “become adults responsible for their own lives and who can no longer allow themselves to ascribe to anyone else the burden of their choices, mistakes or growth” (Carotenuto, 1985).

I am reminded here of the lines from You Can’t Go Home Again in this regard, “ . . . there came to him an image of man’s whole life upon the earth. It seemed to him that all man’s life was like a tiny spurt of flame that blazed out briefly in an illimitable and terrifying darkness, and that all man’s grandeur, tragic dignity, his heroic glory came from the brevity and smallness of the flame . . .” (Wolfe, 1979, Introduction). In my experience, there is a newfound sense of humility, poignancy and generosity that comes
over many of my clients when they more honestly face the true nature of their one life. This seems consistent with Julio’s quest for a new cosmology as seen in their invocation of Teilhard de Chardin and Rudolf Otto to articulate the values inherent in a more sacred sense of the cosmos.

Unfortunately, as Bill pointed out, Jung was right when he said *the numinous is such a scary experience that we build structures to protect us from this undifferentiated phenomenon*. One of the essential tasks in coaching is to accompany people in being with and moving through these fears in order to step into a new story about the cosmos and, subsequently, the ways they want to be in the world. It echoes the advice from one of the master psychologists, the late James Bugenthal (1990), who wrote, “My work is principally to uncover the patterns that have grown up to choke off inner knowing, to help my clients recover their existential sense” (p. 22). What would it be like to imagine ourselves as echoes of the Big Bang? It seems to me that Julio and Bill’s conversation provides much food for thought in envisioning what more is possible with coaching.

**Ontology**

From a narrative coaching perspective, I was taken by Julio’s story about the conversation he had with the man who had been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) but then was faced with the psychiatrist telling the man he had changed his mind. To which the man said, “What do you mean something else? I have ADD.” The man was living that as a way of being—like the same thing as his gender or the color of his eyes. The man had shifted the story he told about himself and so to give up that story now meant also giving up who he thought he was now. It was a great example of Julio’s point that the word “ontology” itself *demand[s] more from us than just speaking of language*. The stories we tell are interwoven with our identities and our worlds. Any attempt to change one stirs the others and, therefore, coaches need to work with people at the level of being as well. Julio’s story and approach speaks to the need for serious attention to the ethics of narrative and ontological work; it is something to which I devote substantial time in my training programs.

Julio identifies an important step in our ethical development with his distinction between tolerance and acceptance. I enjoyed his invitation to *lend me your eyes and let me lend you mine so that we see a bigger picture*. Julio and Bill reference Buber’s seminal work on the “I-Thou” as one way to think about the ontology of our relationship, a frame that is captured magnificently in Buber’s insight that “we unfold in each other.” Julio offers the difficulties with the word “ser” from his native tongue to highlight the importance of the words we have available to describe our existence. I was taken by Julio’s questions about what it might
mean if we truly embraced an I-Thou approach: What if coaching is nothing but helping the human being align with him or herself so that what wants to happen will happen? “Let me help your unfolding to continue”. Coaching, in that case, looks more like a dance. I was reminded of an early research paper I co-wrote that introduced the notion of “relational flow” to frame coaching as an “intuitive dance” (Moore, Drake, Tschannen-Moran, Campone, & Kauffman, 2005). Coaching certainly owes a debt of gratitude to Julio and the others who champion the influential role of ontology working with our clients. May we follow his urging to take our ontology onto the dance floor to help others (and ourselves) more fully unfold!

Epistemology
I stand behind Julio’s claim that the present epistemology will not give us the knowing that is needed to deal with the issues of our time. He describes it as too individualistic, separated, reductionist and unilateral. I appreciated his distinction that as a result we tend to learn about the world but less so from the world. In this interview he is encouraging a greater flow back and forth; in doing so, he demonstrates that an ecological frame would be helpful in fostering that flow between clients and their environments at the level of knowing. One way to do so is to use the epistemological to lift up and legitimize non-dominant ways of knowing to increase the possibilities for both coaching and clients. Another benefit of looking at their language in action is greater visibility for the cosmologies and ontologies with which it is associated. The result should be an epistemology that is more collective, relational, systemic and multilateral in nature.

One of important examples he offers in this regard is the recognition of the essential role of the emotional realm in knowing the center of many of the decisions we make does not come from conceptual achievement as we’d like to think, but rather from the emotional realm. He goes on to talk about the pivotal role of fear in many of our dominant epistemologies—fear has been the core emotional place for a long, long time. However, he also explores what it would mean if the hardwired sensing of fear could be balanced with a greater attention to gratitude. To achieve this balance would mitigate the role of fear in the workplace and thereby create more openness to and legitimacy for the emotional realm. While Julio focuses largely on the overlooked cosmological level and certainly features his strengths in the ontological realm, I was glad that he addressed, albeit more briefly, the epistemological dimensions of our opportunities in coaching and the world. Coaches would do well in this regard to develop stronger alliances with other professions, e.g., organizational development, adult development and facilitation, to create more holistic ways of knowing—for ourselves and with our clients.
**Ecology**

There are some important passages in this interview where Julio speaks to what I am calling for with the ecological frame. For example, he talks about the lack of balance and integration many of us feel every day as well as the slippery slope of a reliance on technology—only to discover that it often amplifies the very problem we hoped it would resolve or creates new ones through its unintended consequences. An ecological frame helps us to see the ways in which it has become a Sisyphean climb such that we can break out of this spell and seek resolution at a different level than the one that created it. It echoes Julio’s observation that *dealing with those crises requires a very profound transformation if we are to handle the varying demands on us*, as illustrated in his anecdote about the fact you can call around the world now yet have difficulty talking to your wife or child right next to you. As he goes on to say, *the profound transformation is not just to accumulate more information about the world; it’s not about gathering more stuff; it’s not about more technology. It’s actually about creating a new inhabitant of this planet. That, for me, would be what comes after modernity, if we survive in the process.*

What a punch line! What I take away from these words is a renewed commitment to assess my contributions to my clients, many of whom are fatigued by the climb and yearn for so much more for themselves and others.

I enjoyed the conversation between Bill and Julio around “agape” as a way to talk about a different stance relative to the ecology of our collective living. In true ontological fashion, their facility with the various origins and meanings of the word opened up a range of new possibilities. For example, they invite coaches to consider that *every gesture of your body when you are tender to another human being helps them to produce safety.* They also connect it to the word “tender” as gentleness and as tendering something, holding it true or safe. I am grateful for the focus on tenderness as it is central to a narrative approach that focuses more on the “container” for the conversation than the immediate outcomes. When the safety for truth is created so much more becomes possible. Working in this way with clients seems essential for the development of coaches, clients and a new ecological sense in our world. I was reminded here of the first time I felt a tear in listening to a moving story from a client. As I relaxed into the experience after some moments of discomfort, I realized that I was genuinely touched by this person and I could use this authentic connection to advance our conversation. And so I did.

This call to care is a great play on words relative to the notion of “duty of care” as has been found in professional psychology and introduced into coaching (see Spence, Cavanagh, & Grant, 2006). The traditional use of the phrase is represented in the medical bottom line, “do no harm”; in the context of this interview the phrase is more generative and could be seen as a
duty to care. As we take an ecological view of our work we are more perceptive about the ways in which the stories we elect, embody and express impact how we relate to our clients and they to those around them. As such, we can choose to balance the need for the legal tender of the world of commerce with the living tender of the world of the heart. I have to imagine that this will have a tremendous impact on our clients, the next generation of coaching and what is possible for our world. I will close this section from some words from Julio.

Care is a force . . . But caring deeply for the person I have in front of me informs that person. It produces a realm of possibilities that otherwise simply will not be there. But, for instance, when I do care, care also is an invocation. The exercise of caring is an invocation to other forces, to other realms. When I care, and I'm in a conversation with you and coaching you, my caring literally is an invocation. I am inviting gods and goddesses to come to support us.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Life is bigger than our explanations of it. To be in touch with life, go beyond your explanations.

One of the hallmarks of great teachers is their commitment to catalyze others to go beyond them. One of the hallmarks of great learners is their commitment to offer their gratitude for those who taught them and then turn to do the same for others. While I have never met Julio, I do know Bill a bit. It seems to me that these are two men who exemplify both teaching and learning at the highest levels. It seemed fitting here to talk about four of the seeds that were planted by Julio and Bill and link each one to the domain it informs for me. As such, I was moved by thinking of (1) suffering as a sign for a new cosmology; (2) experience as a foundation for a new ontology; (3) conversational thresholds as a vision for a new epistemology; and (4) sanctuaries as a resource for a new ecology. I see them as important steps in the development of coaches who are more compassionate, conscious and courageous.

Suffering

The cosmological cycles of life and death have been at the heart of philosophy, religion and culture across time. As part of the stories about these ever-present energies, the question of suffering often emerges. Throughout time people have created stories to explain it and navigate it, in this life and the next, and often have gone to war over it. At a personal level, suffering is a core human experience and one that provides a clear look into a person’s cosmological narrative, particularly about how things “are supposed to be.” I acknowledge Bill for asking Julio, “So you have these wonderful Newfield graduates. They go into organizations that desperately want them to reduce the pain in the organization, make it so we don’t hurt as much. And part of what you’re doing is you’re saying to your people, when you’re
going in initially at least, there’s probably going to be more pain, more suffering.”

I appreciated Julio’s candid remarks, particularly in light of the refugee tales in his life and his father’s life, as he shared the following. I would say that suffering fulfills a role. It’s a key element of human experience. The illusion of a life without suffering produces, in itself, a lot of suffering. Buddhists and others have long held that suffering is a direct result of our attachments to these illusions. He goes on to say that suffering is to the soul, for me, as pain is to the body. It’s a warning system. When we grow, we have a little pain. . . . I think learning to suffer, in a way, is learning to live. . . . Any serious process of reflection, any serious process of building your biology, any serious process of learning emotionally will produce moments of suffering, and I think this is perfectly okay. That has certainly been my experience. I think that part of the interest in mindfulness in coaching is as a path to integrate and work with the dynamics of suffering—not to avoid it but rather to move through it in order to evolve. I believe it will build up a much greater resilience as this first generation of coaches ages, mentors others and engages with the challenges of our times.

Julio goes on to talk about the role of suffering and the importance of listening to its cues and working with what it has to offer. To do so, we also need ontological and epistemological freedom and tools to articulate and process our experience. If the suffering is brought to a context of reflection and practice, it can generate a new future. So, in other words, if suffering is used as a revealing force, it’s enormously powerful. There is a deepening of both our enlightenment and our engagement.

One of the great difficulties we face in the world is that physical suffering is the norm for billions of people and may become increasingly so in a time of disparity and strife around resources. What is our response as coaches? Another difficulty, closer to home for many of us in coaching, is the degree to which suffering is not visibly acknowledged and supported as an essential element in life and learning. Instead, organizations are often marked by fears of the unknown (and not knowing), any signs of weakness (and of failing), and of aging (and falling behind). As a result, there is little space to breathe, to pause, or to reflect — and any signs of suffering, even those that might portend growth, are put away.

As someone who has taught coaching skills to thousands within organizations, my initial work with clients now is focused on them becoming more fully awake and alive as humans first. The coaching skills emerge quite naturally from there. In this light, how will the sudden rise of positive psychology and appreciative inquiry play out as a frame used by many coaches? I appreciated Bill’s tip of the hat to the IJCO interview with Gervase Bushe in this regard. It is an excellent example of making room for suffering as a catalyst for growth rather than focusing on a more limited epistemology where a certain discourse is favored. Overall, it seems critical for coaches to assess their cosmology, the
place of suffering in it, and the role they want to play in helping their clients move toward a more generative set of narratives about the world. What stories do we need to be telling and living now?

**Experience**

A core principle that seems near and dear to Julio’s heart is the primacy of the lived experience. I certainly support this passion as the mutual experience in the field constellated in extraordinary conversations is central to narrative coaching. In this work, coaches stay in the “story time/story space” of the present to work with the narrative material as it emerges. The goal is to help clients, as they so choose, to release the “narrative grip” (Boscolo & Betrando, 1992) of the past and how things are (and will be) by getting down to the experiential level where change is most possible. In taking this approach I’ve been guided by Frieda Fromm-Reichmann’s counsel that people need an experience, not an explanation. Julio takes a similar approach as seen in his comments that every time that we are able to openly experience a phenomenon without aiming to explain it, it is an enormous learning experience. . . . So . . . we talk with people and say, “What is the experience of that?” . . . If we run too quickly to explain it or assess it, we don’t reveal it. All of this points to the power of the pause and silence in coaching to extend and deepen the sense of “now” (see Epstein, 2007; Stern, 2004). In doing so, coaches can empathetically invite clients to move out from behind their masks in order to release their attachments, reach a greater sense of true acceptance, and enhance their level of awakening.

Regardless of any way of explaining them, the power of revealing the experience is enormous because it allows us to visit the edge. So, in corporate life and in any other realm where the expression of experience is not allowed, we are paralyzed. To give expression to the experience is healing, but it is not allowed. So, bringing people to the ability to look at basic experiences is transformational. Revealing them is part of the work we are doing.

Unfortunately, as Julio noted, there’s a conspiracy of silence in every experience that we cannot explain, and therefore it looks like the world is already explained. We are hiding all the experiences that we can’t explain. His comments remind me of Chris Argyris’s notion of “undiscussables”—which themselves often become undiscussable. These often are a liability for clients and organizations. However, are we not ensnaring ourselves in the need for explanation, the very thing we were hoping to move away from in focusing on experience itself? Perhaps one way to move through this impasse is to recognize that in reality no experiences are truly hidden and all of them are available to teach us at that level. I have been exploring this idea lately in light of observations from both Jung and scientists on the conservation of energy within a system. In Jung’s case, he posited that energies hidden from consciousness move into our shadow—and regularly bubble up, seeking our
attention. There is a certain numinosity in these realms, such as in dreams, which works its way upon us whether we know it or not (Hollis, 2004). Silence is not the opposite or absence of discourse but an integral part of its nature. As such, there are lessons to be learned in these spaces—at the experience level more than the explanation level—whether we do the work or not to take them onboard.

Perhaps our task, like with suffering, is to be so profoundly present with our clients that we move beyond the explanations to support them to be increasingly aware of and awake in their experience. In this regard, I appreciated psychologist Mark Epstein’s (2007) comments on Freud’s notion of “evenly suspended attention”. In his book, he writes that this state is characterized by two fundamental properties, “the absence of critical judgment or deliberate attempts to select, concentrate, or understand, and even, equal, and impartial attention to all that occurs within the field of awareness” (p. 102). This approach leads coaches to ask their clients questions such as the one Julio posed, “in this moment, which of these do you wish to explore or to unfold?” What would change in coaching and for our clients if lived experience was more foundational in our ontological ways of being? I appreciated Julio’s remarks as an initial response,

*Coaching wants to connect the fullness of human experience instead of only dealing with an aspect of it. Coaching is not about the moves I make but about the presence I am and what my presence permits, allows, gives room to, and that cannot be translated into tips and recommendations. What’s more important and must come first is the capacity to engage with a human being in such a way that your engagement allows that person to unfold in the way that person has not been able to.*

**Conversational Thresholds**

The power of thresholds was brought home to me the other night when, in the midst of a brewing disagreement with my wife we each said, “We both know where this line of conversation will take us. What can we do differently in this moment that will take us on a new path?” Thresholds are key to the transformative passages people can go through in coaching. The premise, as I read Julio, is to help us move to new levels of candor and vulnerability in the coaching conversations we have with clients and/or they have with each other. You can see it playing out in the story Julio shares about his work in the Latin American company. I resonated in particular with the images of breaking through a conversational black hole and the moment when they crossed that threshold. You can see the same dynamic at an individual level in his story about the man who dared, for the first time in his life, to open some conversations he never opened to anyone. Bill highlighted the important role of the coach in this process as a witness to these types of revelations and conversations. Where are the thresholds in our field and in our practices? About what do we need to be talking more candidly and courageously?
Julio goes on to say that *such a moment has sacredness to it, and the only way is to live it.* I am reminded here of Jungian scholar Robert Moore’s (1987) call to professionals for “sacred leadership” in guiding their actions. Even Socrates said that *if we don’t dare to have some conversation, we never dare to think anything.* And he knew that *to cross the “thresholds of conversation” you need to deal with fear, and you need to create courage.* I can certainly see the value of this approach in a current project to help a very large professional services firm build a coaching culture and increase their coaching competencies across the organization. Rather than focusing on the formal, semi-annual (at best) coaching sessions, we are teaching them to identify thresholds in their daily interactions with peers, staff and clients. Rather than trying to “push” them to use coaching when they are supposed to be doing it, we are “pulling” them to notice more opportunities and be more available to people at those thresholds. This approach seems to align with Julio’s thoughts on the rise of coaching. I believe that coaching is here today out of a dramatic breakdown of our times. What are the emerging concerns that coaching was born to address? For me, it is the crisis of our epistemology.

**Sanctuaries**

Bill provides a great reminder that many of the steps we need to take to create a better future for the planet require us to more fully live into some of the wisdom from the past, “so, when you look at coaching as being a practice that only emerges because the old practices aren’t there, it points to us needing sanctuaries. All we have to do is dust off old words (like “sacred”) and old settings (such as sanctuaries). They are still profound.” The word harkens back to the earlier reference to the notion of tenderness as creating safety for others such that sacred conversations become possible. The connotations of sanctuary as asylum for those at risk resonate here as well in thinking about coaching as a time out of time as Barry Oshry would call it.

In commenting on Bill’s reflections on coaching as a sacred conversation, Julio says *I wholeheartedly agree and take that part of my coaching work very seriously. In doing so, I myself must be willing to be changed by the encounters in these spaces.* This is why in my work I position coaching as a conversation rather than an intervention and frame it as a mutual process of learning. This is in keeping with Julio’s recognition that the etymology of the word “conversation” is “changing together”. I thought the historical reference to the loss of parlors as the one-time location for an American tradition of Sunday visitations where neighbors gathered for extended conversations was a fascinating example of the way in which the ecology in which we live is affected by and affects the epistemology and ontology of people. With their demise a whole way of being and talking faded. Perhaps this was part of the allure of a certain famous coffee shop. I often think that coaching is one of the few places where people feel truly seen and heard.

Rather than trying to “push” them to use coaching when they are supposed to be doing it, we are “pulling” them to notice more opportunities and be more available to people at those thresholds.
What a gift! It seems to me that part of what coaching offers, at its best, is this sense of sacred meeting ground and sanctuary for clients.

**IN THE END . . .**

Taken together, these four ways of looking at life and working with clients reflect the four orders of mystery as identified by Jungian analyst James Hollis (2005): the transcendent speaks to our cosmology, the environment speaks to our ecology, the tribe speaks to our epistemology, and our own psychological grounding speaks to our ontology. The four ways also mirror Joseph Campbell’s work on the four major functions that mythology serves in our lives—the cosmological, the mystical (ontological), pedagogical (epistemological) and sociological (ecological). It is a rare treat to traverse all four domains in reflecting about the craft of coaching (Drake, 2008). Cosmology, ontology, epistemology and ecology provide a framework for Julio’s vision for coaching and a way to structure our own development and work as coaches. We are indeed the people we have been waiting for. I am grateful for the opportunity to offer my comments on this fabulous dialogue between Bill and Julio. It seems fitting to close with a few words from Julio: I do believe that we “become” in a dance with other people. The poorer the dance, the poorer my becoming. So, we need to ask questions, not only as individuals but as part of humankind. What has impoverished our becoming? What has brought us to the place where we are? What wants to manifest that we are not allowing?

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