Coaching Pioneers:
Laura Whitworth and Thomas Leonard

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This article about two pioneers in the field of organizational coaching — Thomas Leonard and Laura Whitworth — is based on the author’s interviews with more than 170 senior practitioners in the field — including interviews with one of these two pioneers (Whitworth). Offering anecdotes from her interviews, as well as her own personal acquaintance with Leonard and Whitworth, Vikki Brock serves up many insights about the early days in this field, as well as about the distinctive characteristics exhibited by these two founders and rule-breakers.

I am a great admirer of Laura Whitworth and Thomas Leonard for their significant contributions to the foundation, structure and institutions of field of coaching. I first met Thomas in 1996 and was an avid follower of his innovative programs until his death in 2003. I did not meet Laura until 2006 when I interviewed her and subsequently attended the last Bigger Game workshop she led.

My intent with this article is to present a balanced and holistic perspective of Laura and Thomas. My views are influenced by my own relationship with them and the interviews I conducted with those who knew both of them. Without their contributions, taken solely or together, the field of coaching would not exist as we know it today.

BACKGROUND

Laura and Thomas had rich and full lives prior to meeting in 1985 and beginning their coaching careers in 1988.

Laura’s life was a series of transformations. Married several times, she spent time in Alaska conducting adventure tours and hunting bears. At 20 she joined the Peace Corps and spent two years as a volunteer in Nepal. Prior to that, she was a poor student who did not think of herself as smart. Returning from Nepal she enrolled in the College of Business and Management at the University of Maryland and graduated cum laude. Spending two successful years as a CPA with Arthur Andersen & Company, she got bored and returned to California. Once there, in 1987 she took Werner Erhard’s est courses, which transformed her again. The rest of her life was focused on making a difference in the world. In 1997 at the age of 50 her life transformed yet again when she and Judy Pike became life partners.
Thomas was born in 1955 and raised in the San Francisco area. Graduating from high school, he took distance courses to become a financial planner and accountant. Living in San Francisco during the sixties and seventies, where Werner Erhard also founded est, Thomas was exposed to the principles and ideals of the human growth movement from an early age. In the mid to late 1980’s, he worked in the accounting department of Werner Erhard and Associates (WEA) where he first encountered the concept of coaching. A gypsy at heart, he lived in Salt Lake City, Seattle, Houston and Phoenix during the 1990s, when he wasn’t traveling the United States in his motor home with his dog Fringe. Openly gay, he described himself as super sensitive and was described by the Coaching Insider as “an enthusiastic powerhouse who was constantly creating”.

**WHO WERE LAURA AND THOMAS?**

There were two sides of Thomas – he was highly collaborative on one hand and highly competitive on the other hand. Thomas was a man of contrasts. There were times when people were ‘in’ and people were ‘out’. He could be stubborn: “If I can’t have my way I’m going to do my own thing.” Several of the people I interviewed suggest that Thomas refused to become involved with The Coaching Caucus during the mid-1990’s primarily because Laura was involved. This Caucus was the precursor to the Professional and Personal Coaches Association (PPCA) and the International Coaching Federation (ICF) (originally created for students and graduates of Coach University). Alternatively, Thomas could be the visionary who created and contributed. In the early 2000’s he created the International Association of Coaches (IAC) when the ICF began moving in a direction he didn’t support. As numerous people whom I interviewed described, it was only in later years that Thomas fully recognized that he was bi-polar – which accounted partially for him being totally prolific and generative, and then getting depressed and removing himself to a new environment.

A true genius, he was a mix of fierce competitor and abundant generosity who could be challenging and polarizing.

Like Thomas, Laura was very passionate about it all. More than Thomas, however, Laura seemed to create her actions in service of humanity. Laura was open to what others were doing and committed to collaboration – she attended a coaching presentation by David Peterson at the University of Maryland where she met Timothy Gallwey who later became her coach. She connected with John Whitmore in the UK, who keynoted at the first PPCA conference, and attended one of Julio Olalla’s coaching ontology conferences in Mexico. Laura was a member of both PPCA and ICF. In fact, the idea for The Coaching Caucus held in San Francisco during the Spring of 1994 was birthed from conversations Laura had with Sandy Vilas of Coach University. They agreed that it was

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about time to create something for the coaching industry. Their goal was to invite as many leaders in the world of coaching as they could find. Laura never broadcast her role – instead she waved the flag and said ‘follow me.’ According to some, the International Association of Professional Coaches (IAPPC) and PPCA, which was birthed out of The Coaching Caucus, would never have been born without Laura as the catalyst – creating the space for both to emerge and then asking, “Who will run this?”

Laura stood firm for her beliefs and principles, whether it was the popular thing to do or not. One very public example of this was at the 1997 ICF conference where Coach U demonstrated a methodology they called The Fishbowl. According to Laura:

They had four coaches on a panel, on a stage, including myself, and then they would bring up a client of Coach U, and each coach would have at the client for a little while – start telling you what you’re feeling, what you’re thinking, what you should do and what you shouldn’t do. I couldn’t participate in it and call it coaching. And it isn’t what Coach U meant as coaching either.

Jeff Raim, the president of ICF at the time, wrote an email clarifying what had happened:

There seems to be much talk about what happened during the Sunday morning hot seat demonstration. Such that I determined it was important to bring some additional clarity and context to all our members. One of our panelists, Laura Whitworth, a PPCA and ICF member felt what was being demonstrated did not fit her demonstration of coaching and removed herself from the panel.

In 2000 when Laura started The Bigger Game Company with Rick Tamlyn her focus was to take coaching into prisons. When she was diagnosed with cancer in 2004 she set up the prisons project so other people could run and sustain it. Her new bigger game became surviving cancer while making a difference in the world about the way that Western medicine and the government support people fighting cancer.

THE COACHING BUG

The coaching bug sounds like it began for Laura following est and collaborating with Thomas Leonard. After taking the Forum, Laura wanted to go to work for Werner Erhard and Associates (WEA). She wanted to be around it more and decided she was going to go to work for Werner Erhard & Associates. According to Laura:

Thomas Leonard was the person who hired me while his boss was on vacation. I am a recovering CPA and he was a financial planner and he was working in the accounting
department and hired me in the accounting department. While he was working for est, he only knew about this program from a participant’s point of view. That’s where Leslie Mitchell, a mothering type who was one of Thomas’s greatest friends at that time, kept encouraging Thomas to do what he was doing. In the process he started doing some financial planning for major course leaders at WEA.

Thomas left WEA in 1988 to start his own business. By the end of the year, after attending Thomas’s Life Planning Workshop pilot, Laura had also left to start her own business. Laura had discovered during the workshop that having a buddy contributed and would be worth paying for. Until then Laura had been a person with an employee-mentality, rather than an entrepreneurial mentality. In Laura’s words:

Thomas, who had offices at 560 Commercial St., said, “You want to start a business, I’ll loan you this corner of my office space for a really reasonable rent.” I scared the heck out of myself, but I took him up on that near the end of 1988. I started a business that ended up becoming a coaching business called Priority One… I discovered a methodology for coaching that really particularly worked for me. I was also in the room where the copier machine was and Thomas would come in and hear what I was doing on the phone with my clients. We’d hang out with and rubbed off on each other.

Thomas and Laura merged parallel coaching track – coach training and coaching respectively. He created an organization called The College for Life Planning and conducted several more pilot workshops, one of which was in Laura’s apartment and attended by Sandy Vilas. Students were pursuing the designation of certified life-planner and Laura began calling herself Life Coach. Laura met Henry Kimsey House at a Werner Erhard course called “Presentation, Negotiation, and Enrollment” in New York City in 1989. Henry became her second client when she cornered him in the parking lot of the Erhard course and said “We at Priority One are looking for people of your caliber to work with for coaching.” According to Alan Collins, at this point in time Thomas was conducting seminars for 200 people in Florida at $10 a head.

In 1990 Laura started getting together with Henry about founding the Coach Training Institute (CTI). Though he was not interested at the time she had the tenacity to make it happen. After being out of the business for six months in 1990, Thomas resumed doing coach training. In 1991, Thomas offered Laura and Henry Kimsey-House his College for Life Planning materials to create a coaching workshop for the California region, which he had given to them. In Laura’s words:

Thomas and Laura’s contributions to coaching are extensive, both engaging concepts from Erhard’s Landmark Forum and life design movement, as well those of other people who fed Erhard their ideas.
And when Thomas said, “Here, you guys want to start thinking about coaching?” he gave us his material and we sat with it for a while and then we looked at...you know, we’re just not that style. Thomas was a little more on the Erhard side. Here he had a program called The Clean Sweep and he got points and the problem with it is that it’s dogmatic, it said, you know, if you wore the right kind of sunglasses and if you brushed your teeth a certain way you got points and it wasn’t like The Clean Sweep was the end all and be all, but it was a representation of the program telling the client the way they needed to be. Thomas had lots of good stuff and he went to a lot of different places, he got lots of exposure to a lot of things, and pulled it all together and it was too much.

Thomas came back five to six months later in 1992 and requested that the materials be returned, just before Laura and Henry did their first workshop. Laura, Henry and Karen Kimsey-House subsequently created their own materials and delivered the workshop. Laura described her reaction as:

So we probably went overboard going the opposite direction. So we started to have a little bit of a problem, Thomas and me in particular—because I couldn’t say yes to his material. We grew, but we grew in a different direction than Thomas and we felt that our material had a different flavor to it, neither good nor bad, but a very different flavor. Thomas was unhappy with me about this.

This situation created a schism when Thomas threatened lawsuits, and a fierce competition between CTI and Coach U began.

**CONCEPTUAL INFLUENCES**

Both Laura and Thomas were conceptually influenced by Erhard, who in turn was influenced by Fernando Flores. The similarity ended there. Thomas used much of the language and perspective from the WEA in his curriculum at Coach University—in fact Landmark sued him in the mid-1990s with the suit being settled out of court and the borrowed language being removed from the curriculum. Laura took the opposite approach and did everything to ensure CTI’s coaching was not forceful, as the coaching at WEA had been. Laura brought the views of Carl Rogers, creator of client-centered therapy, to the PPCA and CTI, as well as the core competencies and credentialing process of the ICF. She also brought forth the distinction between finding and giving answers.

Another difference in the initial evolution of CTI and Coach U concerned the venue in which coach training took place. Face-to-face trainings were conducted at CTI, whereas Coach U made use of internet and telephone technology. The phone was a perfect vehicle for Thomas. He could comfortably connect with other people by telephone. The core difference at a later point concerned
the sequencing of training events. Coach U taught people a form of depth coaching from Day One. By contrast, CTI would start with the coaching skills and move to the depth coaching later in their program.

**APPROACH TO COACHING**

Another way to look at the differences between the approaches taken by Thomas and Laura is from the perspective of scores on the Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). Based on four polarity scales, the MBTI framework is as follows:

- **Introvert-Extravert** – where a person gets their energy
- **Sensing-Intuition** – how a person takes in information
- **Thinking-Feeling** – how a person makes decisions
- **Judging-Perceiving** – a person’s orientation to the world

Laura co-founded an extraverted, intuitive, feeling and perceiving (ENFP) company. A charismatic individual with a knack for gathering groups of people and empowering them to carry his vision forward, Laura did much to lay the groundwork for what we know as coaching today. Though just as passionate about coaching and its potential to serve humanity, Thomas was the exact opposite on the MBTI framework - being introverted, sensing, thinking and judging (which means systematic and organized) (ISTJ). He viewed coaching from a business perspective, developing conceptual models that shifted and broadened perspectives (like the Attraction Program) along with programs that were more prescriptive and detailed (like the Clean Sweep which had 100 points). A visionary with the ability to generate materials and attract media opportunities, Thomas, like Laura, did much to lay the groundwork for coaching as we know it today.

Thomas was described by one person I interviewed as wanting to call the shots. He was willing to work his tail off to provide value so that he would be perceived as the leader of this newly-emerging industry. This competition was always pushing and inspiring him to pursue excellence and come up with new ideas. At the same time, Thomas described himself as a super-sensitive person. He was known to create a massive amount of information and then crash, as many geniuses do. In the world of being and doing, Laura was on the side of being and Thomas was on the side of doing.

One of Laura’s strengths was her ability to connect with people, which was opposite of Thomas’s greatest strengths to connect and synthesize ideas and concepts. When looking at their respective accomplishments, Thomas achieved his largely alone, while Laura achieved hers in partnership. Thomas’s accomplishments include founding Coach U, the International Coach Federation, Coachville, and the International Association of Coaches. Laura’s accomplishments are just as impressive: co-founder of the Coaches Training Institute (CTI), founding member of the
Personal Professional Coaches Association (PPCA), co-founder of the Alliance of Coach Training Organizations (ACTO) and co-founder of The Bigger Game Company.

In 1998, Laura co-authored *Co-Active Coaching*, which continues to be one of the most recommended coaching books of all time. Thomas authored six coach-related books after 1998: *Working Wisdom, The Portable Coach, Becoming a Coach, Simply Brilliant, The Coaching Forms Book* (6th edition) and *The Distinctionary*, along with 14 internally published works available exclusively to the coaches at Coach University.

**CONTRIBUTIONS TO COACHING**

Thomas and Laura’s contributions to coaching are extensive, both engaging concepts from Erhard’s Landmark Forum and life design movement, as well those of other people who fed Erhard their ideas. Thomas synthesized and generated tools, programs, strategies and solutions. Coach University’s curriculum and model was perfected through the College for Life Planning – which articulated, simplified, commoditized and made assessable the principles of Landmark. Thomas trained people who impacted the hundreds of people who are behind them in their life. His business strategy was to give away his best stuff on the front end and charge on the back end. Generous with his time, materials, knowledge and wisdom, he was a savvy business person who, due to his introverted nature and fascination with technology, gave coaching the phone model of coaching.

Laura’s approach was similar and yet markedly different. Involved in coaching from the very beginning, when Thomas invited her to a pilot for a Life-Planning Workshop in 1988, Laura was focused on making a difference through collaboration and connection. Coach Training Institute was birthed in 1992 when Laura and Henry Kimsey-House did their first workshop. From the beginning Laura was interested in professionalizing coaching. In 1994 she was instrumental in the start-up of the Professional and Personal Coaches Association (PPCA), which later combined with the International Coach Federation (ICF) and, in 1998, her involvement led to the first Executive Coaching Summit. In 2000, the Co-Active Coaching Training program was delivered in a Federal Prison in Colorado to a group of inmates who were working with Youth at Risk. This project became known as Laura’s “Bigger Game.”

Laura saw development of an association as a community move and Thomas saw ownership of the association as a business move. Thomas created Coach University in 1992, followed by providing seed money for the International Coach Federation (ICF) in 1995, which was created as an alumni association and in reaction to the PPCA. This pattern was repeated when Coachville was founded in 2001 (at the time when Thomas’s non-compete clause with Coach
U had expired). Similarly, Thomas provided seed money in 2003 to start the International Association of Coaches (IAC) in reaction to the ICF.

Figure 1. Organizational creations of Laura Whitworth and Thomas Leonard

Thomas Leonard was a vociferous reader and masterful synthesizer, while Laura was a connector who searched out people with whom she could collaborate and from whom she could learn. In 2006 Laura characterized Thomas’ abilities as:

Back when we were still both working for est, he invited me and he paid me something like $7 an hour to come to his house and sit with him while he went through magazines and pulled out information to help him create catalogs of information about things. . . . Thomas was innovative in creating all of the time, and he was doing a lot of his innovation and creation from a lot of different material. His own material was built off of or stepping, standing on the shoulders of others - that was his forte. I know he was definitely digesting all the time.

Thomas is credited with extensive cross-disciplinary borrowing—which has continued to be a distinctive hallmark of professional
coaching. Dave Buck described Thomas Leonard as a “synthesizer” working with “hundreds, thousands of people to create. His R&D teams were where anyone could get in on the ground floor of generativity. Yet while he was collaborating he also had his vision — a vision of himself being highly impactful, being a leader, being competitive against other companies doing similar things.”

Thomas co-wrote *The Portable Coach* in 1998, which reached number nine at Amazon.com thanks to his media expertise. While Laura is credited with professionalizing coaching, Thomas is credited with popularizing coaching. Anthony Grant says: “If you had to say who was the one person who commercialized and marketed coaching it would have to be Thomas Leonard.” Thomas had a publicity machine, of which he describes the impact at his www.thomasleonard.com website: “In early 1996, the media discovered Coach University and I got to be on the major TV networks and large daily newspapers, Donahue and received coverage in a number of other countries. Over 250 stories worldwide were published from February 1996 to December 1999.”

David Goldsmith describes the steps taken in anticipation of a *Newsweek* article on coaching: “[we were] organizing teams of people just to respond to all the phone calls coming in. It created much attention in other media. [They started] doing stories on coaching. [There] was just an enormous amount of newspaper, radio and TV. It all came out of the Newsweek article”. David Peterson said during his interview: “It was Thomas who popularized coaching and helped with the market perception of executive coaching. And if he hadn’t been doing that, executive coaching never really would have taken off like it did. . . . Thomas didn’t only publish books, when you talk about popularizing, that’s where you talk about creating these professional organizations and the ‘ask the coach’ column in the London Times and the Newsweek article”.

From the beginning, the IAPPC and PPCA were professional associations in the traditional sense. Members in both were from diverse backgrounds and training programs, and paid dues to belong. Each had a printed newsletter, elected officers, and created a code of ethics — characteristics of a newly-emerging profession during the 20th Century. By contrast, a coach became a member of ICF by virtue of being a graduate or student of Coach University. No dues were paid. Email was used for ICF communications in lieu of a printed newsletter. Officers were appointed from among the board members who were also on the Coach U board. An ethics code did not exist in ICF. These characteristics are much more aligned with an alumni group than a professional group.

Laura and Thomas both had a major impact on the emergence and evolution of the coaching industry. Table One portrays their accomplishments and key facts of their lives.
**Table 1. Category comparison between Laura and Thomas**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Laura</th>
<th>Thomas</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Death/year</td>
<td>60/Feb 2007</td>
<td>47/Feb 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coach Training Schools</td>
<td>CTI</td>
<td>Coach U, Coachville</td>
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<td>Professional Organization</td>
<td>IAPPC, PPCA</td>
<td>ICF, IAC</td>
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<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>Finance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Influences</td>
<td>Werner Erhard + others</td>
<td>Werner Erhard</td>
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<tr>
<td>Approach</td>
<td>ENFP</td>
<td>ISTJ</td>
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<tr>
<td>Books</td>
<td><em>Co-Active Coaching</em></td>
<td><em>Portable Coach + others</em></td>
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<td>Other contributions</td>
<td>Core Competencies</td>
<td>Codified curriculum</td>
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<td>Media exposure</td>
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**CONCLUSIONS**

Thomas Leonard helped create the coaching industry with his vision, his ability to assimilate and simplify complex concepts, and his marketing and media savvy. I first met Thomas in April 1996 when I traveled to Houston, Texas where he was leading an in-person workshop for Coach U. Thomas and I were staying with Sandy Vilas – me on the couch and Thomas in the second bedroom. About 11pm the sliding door opened and Thomas entered. We greeted each other and proceeded to have a 45-minute conversation in the dark about his discomfort with speaking to large groups, his sensitivity and his vision for coaching. Our paths would cross many times over the next seven years and he was always available and generous with himself and his wisdom.

Laura Whitworth helped shape the coaching industry with her boldness, creativity, humanness—and, in the end, asked only that each person find meaning in life by playing their Bigger Game. This orientation was apparent when in 2000 she successfully led the effort to take the Co-Active Coaching model into the federal and California state prison system. Though I knew of Laura for many years, I first met her in April 2006 when I interviewed her for my PhD dissertation on the evolution of coaching. Being such a pioneer, we ended up having two lengthy interviews about the early days. Laura was genuine, gracious, humble and very generous as I came to know her during our interactions over the next year. I attended The Bigger Game workshop she co-led in mid-April 2006 and my admiration grew for her as a human being and true leader.

Coaching lost two of its pioneers, Thomas and Laura, just four years apart on February 11, 2003 and February 28, 2007 respectively. With very little warning, Thomas died of a heart attack with many projects and ideas left unfinished. Just 20 months later Laura was diagnosed with cancer for a second time, though this time it was lung cancer rather than breast cancer as it was in 1990. In a letter she wrote in September 2004, she describes:
“You have a spot on your lung. It looks like cancer.” I heard those words like an avalanche, and my world has not been the same since. Yes. I’ve been diagnosed with stage one lung cancer, and recent surgery removed the middle lobe of my right lung and several lymph nodes. They tell me the prognosis for my recovery is good — statistically an 80% survival rate after 5 years, especially if I pursue Chemotherapy. Still, I worry. . . It feels so strange to calmly type these words here. . . One of the gifts of a diagnosis like this is that it brings the always lurking prospect of imminent death to the foreground, providing a constant new lens through which to view each and every moment.”

Laura thought that she had discovered coaching and Thomas thought that he discovered it — yet both of them had been influenced by Werner Erhard. At Laura’s memorial it was said “Thomas Leonard evolved the business of coaching, and Laura Whitworth evolved the heart and soul of coaching”. It took both of them, and many others, to bring coaching to where it is today.

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A Master Certified Coach (MCC), Certified Executive Coach and Professional Mentor Coach, Vikki Brock brings the wisdom, experience, and proven processes to move leaders and individuals to higher stages of personal awareness and effectiveness. Employing a multifaceted approach to individual development, she partners with and respectfully provokes her clients to create authentic strengths-based success from the inside and by their own definition. Her coaching emphasis is on authenticity, talent development and individual improvement for personal and organizational health and increased productivity. Her role as coach is to “raise awareness so clients are at conscious choice”.
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